

MACFADDEN

MB
BOOKS

60-191

A MAN CALLED PALADIN

60c

TV's popular HAVE GUN, WILL TRAVEL hero in
his exciting, action-packed adventures as
the self-chosen champion of frontier justice

Frank G.
Robertson

(Based on the popular
television series:
HAVE GUN,
WILL TRAVEL)



"Western fans will get a six-gun bang..."

Evansville, Indiana Press

GAMBLING AND WOMEN WERE HIS HOBBIES . . .

. . . killing was his calling! Paladin was paid thousands each time his gun was hired—but he got no personal satisfaction out of killing.

Part cynic, part philosopher—and **all man**—his “business” took him from San Francisco to Walla, Walla, Washington, as he courted justice for himself, and for all the helpless victims of power and evil on the old frontier.

HIS GUN WAS FOR HIRE . . .

. . . but not his soul. Paladin had the code of a gentleman and the savage instincts of a mountain lion!

Mostly he was a loner. But he made many friends: *Smoke*, the dying defender of Delta Valley, who “knighted” him and named him “Paladin”; beautiful *Inga*, who loved him and kept him on the brink of matrimony; and *Hey Boy*, the faithful Chinaman, who served him and helped him break up an opium ring.

And Paladin had many enemies. He lived in constant danger, but he had a sharp mind and a sharp trigger finger—he could take care of his foes with his quick derringer or his bare fists.

A true “Paladin”—a *knightly crusader*—he was also one of the roughest, toughest heroes of the West.

HERE'S WHAT THE CRITICS SAY:

“ . . . told in the style that has gained Frank Robertson an enviable reputation as an author of more than 100 books on the Old West.”

St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*

“ . . . fast moving Western . . . Robertson's best . . . never a dull moment . . . thrill-packed adventure.”

Blackfoot, Idaho *News*

“The characterization fits the television mode perfectly . . . nice, light reading.”

San Antonio *Express*

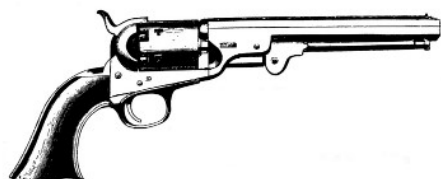
“ . . . a credit to Author Robertson . . . entertaining . . . ”

Lewiston, Maine *Sun*

“ . . . a readable book . . . ”

Salt Lake *Tribune*

A MAN CALLED PALADIN



FRANK C. ROBERTSON

MB

A MACFADDEN-BARTELL BOOK

THIS BOOK IS THE COMPLETE TEXT
OF THE HARDCOVER EDITION

A MACFADDEN BOOK 1964

MACFADDEN BOOKS are published by
Macfadden-Bartell Corporation
205 East 42nd Street, New York, New York, 10017

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 63-15696

Copyright, ©, 1963, Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. All rights reserved. Published by arrangement with The Macmillan Company.

P.V.S EBOOK

Printed in Canada

A MAN CALLED PALADIN



CHAPTER 1

The dingy hotel room had become stifling with tobacco smoke and the poker game was breaking up. Four of the five men under the yellow overhead gas lamp were heavy losers. Norge, the owner of the room, sat at the head of the table with his winnings in front of him hunched over like a gross and greedy toad. He was big and lumpy but he possessed remarkably nimble fingers which had brought him up the social scale from bartender to one of San Francisco's most notorious and successful gamblers.

Three of the men were leaving. Two looked like businessmen who could afford their losses; the third looked as if he might go out and throw himself into the bay. The opening of the door set in motion light blue streamers of tobacco smoke, which settled slowly when the door closed.

Norge and the remaining man faced each other across the table. Norge fingered a slip of paper, his opaque eyes fixed on the face of the younger man. "Payable on demand," he said coldly.

The younger man's gray-blue eyes narrowed. He was in his early thirties; a muscular, raw-boned man just over six feet with black hair and mustache and shaggy eyebrows. He had a large nose and a long upper lip; a face which perhaps only a loving mother or a devoted wife could have called handsome, but no one would have called it weak. He was the only one of the five who looked like a professional gambler. His suit was pearl gray, relieved by a flowered vest across which hung a heavy gold watch chain with an expensive fob. He wore an immaculate ruffled white shirt and a flowing lavender cravat, and his boots were polished to a glistening blackness. Just now he looked surprised and annoyed.

He said, "I told you I didn't have the money when you offered to take my IOU."

"You owe me fifteen thousand dollars, and I want it now," Norge said tonelessly.

"Yet six hours ago you knew I didn't have the money, and you knew I couldn't get it tonight. So, it's not cash you are looking for. Just what is it you want of me, Norge?"

"Now you're being smart. A man like you can always pay his debts if he tries, and, Mister, you had better try." The grimace which with Norge passed for a smile faded, and a look of naked, implacable hatred took its place. He leaned forward in his chair and his thick

voice changed to a menacing growl. He reminded the other man of a grizzly bear at bay.

"It's simple," Norge said. "All I ask of you is to kill a man."

Smith, as the younger man was known, regarded Norge without surprise. He said slowly, "From you the price would be at least that."

"And you'll pay it." Norge shoved back his chair and paced the floor. His words poured out in a flood of frustration. "I don't like a man who can be scared, but I am. There's a place down in Arizona called Delta Valley. It's mine. My valley and my town. I own it all, and everything in it, including the people. But if I even set foot in it I'd be dead before sunrise."

A consummation devoutly to be wished, Smith thought. He asked mildly, "Of what?"

Norge dropped heavily back in his chair. "Who knows? a bullet, a knife, maybe even a rope—whatever suits the whim of the man you've got to kill."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll be as dead as the man they call Smoke ought to be. Don't think I haven't got the power to bring it about, unless I decide to let you live and wish you were dead."

"And you think you can frighten me into committing a murder?"

"It wouldn't be murder. Smoke is wanted in a dozen states for every crime in the book from murder to horse stealing."

"Then why don't you let the law—"

"It couldn't touch him. You don't know that valley. It's got only one entrance, and the walls are a thousand feet high. This Smoke rode in there one day, sick and wounded, and the people nursed him back to health. He got them to rebel against me, and now they worship him like he was a god or something."

"And he ran you out," Smith said softly.

"He did. He killed my two guards, and if I had been there he would have killed me."

"And that one man has kept you out ever since?"

The brooding Norge said, "You don't understand. He's a fiend, and those people spy for him and supply all his wants. There's a thousand hiding places in that valley. Oh, I've sent men after him, but none of them have ever come back."

"And what makes you think I could do any better?"

"I've looked up your record and you're no saint. I saw you fight a duel here in San Francisco, and I know it wasn't the first time. You're cool, and you can act the gentleman, whether you are one or not.

What I'm counting on is this. They'll let you into the town, knowing that Smoke will kill you if you try to bushwhack him. But he pretends to be a gentleman, too. If you go down there and challenge him to a duel I'm sure he'll accept it. He sent word that he would meet me if I cared to accept his challenge."

"And you want to fight a duel by proxy because you know that you can't win. Well, maybe I can't."

"See to it that you do. My gunmen can't get at Smoke, but they can get at you. If you don't get him you'll face jail and disgrace and eventually death. I'm a determined man, Smith."

Norge had laid his trap well. He had appeared to be a clumsy poker player, but he was not. He had got Smith to break a rule about not giving his IOU, and he could surely force him to leave the city—and Smith liked San Francisco.

Smith said, "You claim to be a gambler. I'll let you prove it. Tear up that IOU right now and I'll give you my word that I'll challenge your man Smoke to a duel which he may win."

"You think I'd destroy my security?" Norge sneered.

"I think you will because I'm your last chance and I won't do your job and still be beholden to you. If I come back I'll have squared the whole account. I won't hire out to assassinate a man. If you're telling the truth you'll get your valley back. If you're lying I'll come back and kill you. There's your gamble."

Norge looked at him. Whatever fears and forces were driving him he saw in Smith his one chance to dispose of an enemy, and Smith was implacable. He lighted a match, applied it to the IOU and they watched it burn.

Two weeks later found Smith nearing the town of Delta. He had ridden all day across a desert, leading a pack horse behind him. Except that he had changed his gray suit for a black one, and his clothes were covered with dust, he looked much as he had in San Francisco. Nobody would mistake him for a drifter.

The country ahead was rugged. The lofty minarets outlined the hidden valley, and he could understand why Norge had insisted that it was inaccessible. Somewhere in there was a man called Smoke whom he had never seen, but whom he had come a long, long way to kill in a fair fight. The question was whether or not Smoke understood the code of a gentleman, and would abide by the rules.

He held no malice against Smoke, but plenty against the man who had sent him. Smoke interested him. He might be the deeply dyed villain Norge had portrayed, or he might not. He had to know. Norge

had shown him papers which indicated that he was the rightful owner of Delta Valley.

The entrance was not a hundred yards wide, with broken cliffs rising steeply on either side. There were a dozen places from whence a man could be picked off by a hidden marksman. If the people inside were as loyal to Smoke as Norge claimed it was no wonder the gunmen Norge had sent had never come back. Smith rode loosely in the saddle, prepared to hit the dirt.

Suddenly the canyon opened up and he found himself at the edge of a typical desert town. It had been built without plan, and the road, which seemed to be the only street, weaved in and out among mostly Spanish-type adobe buildings. In spite of its irregularity there was a certain well kept neatness about it.

Beyond the store and the cantina he could see a white-painted church with a cross above. The tolling of the church bell reminded him that he had forgotten that it was Sunday, and Norge had neglected to tell him that there was a church. It was evening service though it wouldn't be dark for a long while, and the people were moving slowly toward the church. From the looks of the people dressed in their rural Sunday best he thought the entire population of the valley must be gathered here. Norge had lied. These were not outlaws, but simple farm folk; not dull, but lean and Godfearing with the marks of hard, everyday toil upon them.

He rode past the closed store and found himself the object of disapproving attention from the stern, expressionless people. Then three people, one of whom was a woman, moved toward him. He stopped and said, "Good evening."

They did not respond, but eyed him coldly, even hatefully. Two of them he was sure were husband and wife. They were in their forties; tall and lean, shoulders stooped by hard work. Smith noticed their brown, bony knuckles.

The third man was older, softer, a little corpulent, without the outward stoicism of the other two. *The man who owns the store*, Smith thought.

"I am looking," he said, "for Mr. Reston."

"You've found him," the storekeeper said. "Norge send you?"

"He said you were his agent."

"I guess you could call it that," Reston answered. He looked the stranger up and down with no trace of friendliness, then added, "You're different at any rate. Most of Norge's killers try to slip in at night."

"But we bury 'em in the daytime," the farmer said.

Reston said, "This is Mr. and Mrs. Burton. They own a small ranch up the valley, and they are honest, hardworking citizens."

"I dare say. You mean they rent from Mr. Norge, don't you?"

"I'm supposed to send him tribute from them, not rent. You didn't mention your name."

"No, I didn't."

"You'd better. We always try to put their names on their headboards," Mrs. Burton said.

Smith smiled grimly. "I'm not planning on having use for a headboard just yet."

Reston said, "Then why don't you just turn around and ride back where you came from?"

"I came to find a man called Smoke. I won't leave until I do."

Silence bore down upon them. The other people moved on toward the church. With a sigh Reston said, "We like Delta Valley, Mr. No-Name. We like it just the way it is."

"I thought you were Norge's man."

"Once he may have owned me, but no more. He sends me bills for rent which I ignore. Things have changed since he exacted tribute at the point of a gun."

Mrs. Burton said, "Without Norge and his gunfighters to rob us we have found our pride again. My husband and I can work for ourselves, and look the whole world in the face again."

Burton smiled fondly at his wife; then his face hardened as he looked up at the stranger and said, "That's how we feel, and Smoke has given us our freedom. Your friend Norge can't run this valley from San Francisco. Smoke has seen to that."

They were looking at him with pity, not hatred—or as if he were already dead.

The stranger said coldly, "I didn't say Norge was my friend. Where can I find this man Smoke?"

"If you stay he'll find you," the woman said.

"How can I hurry that up?"

"Just ride on up the valley, Mister, and wait," Reston said. They walked on toward the church.

The man who called himself Smith sat looking after them until they entered the church, then spoke to his horses and rode on up the valley to what he knew would be a rendezvous with destiny. He had faced death many times before, but always with a sense of excitement, and he had been willing to take his chances. Here the cards were all stacked by relentless fate, but in whose favor he didn't know.

The great granite cliffs whose minarets he had seen rose vertically hundreds of feet in the air, and he could see where they closed in above. The only way out was back, but he rode forward. To himself he quoted Homer:

“No living man can send me to the shades
Before my time; no man of woman born,
Coward or brave, can shun his destiny.”

A turbulent creek made its twisting way down one side of the valley; its banks lined with cottonwood trees and underbrush. The floor of the valley was broken by rocky knolls and ridges, though he could see small, well kept ranches. A wagon road ran along the creek and this he followed until it crossed the creek where there was just room enough between projecting cliffs for a wagon to pass. On the other side was an open space large enough to make camp. He forced his horses across and dismounted before allowing them to drink.

He was dirty, tired and thirsty, and he lay flat down on the bank and plunged his mouth into the ice-cold water. He drank deeply, then wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, squatted back on his heels.

His horses threw up their heads and snorted and he was on his feet with a single lithe movement, his hand on the butt of his gun. The horses were peering back the way they had come, but he could see no movement in the brush, and presently the horses dropped their heads. It could have been an animal—or it could have meant that he was being followed.

He unsaddled, hobbled his horses and let them graze away; then built a fire and cooked his supper. It was after dark before he had washed his few utensils and rolled out his blanket. He carefully extinguished the fire, removed his hat and boots and went to bed.

He couldn't at once go to sleep. It wasn't that he had come here to kill a man he had never seen that kept him awake, for the man probably deserved killing. He was used to a rough way of life and had killed men before, and somewhere in the world was another man whom he had pledged himself to hunt down and destroy if he had to make a career of it. This wasn't the thing that worried him. He decided that it was the air of mystery and menace about this prisonlike valley.

He couldn't forget the three people he had talked with. There had been something impersonal about their obvious hatred. They had acted as if burying him would be an unpleasant task, but they had had no doubt that they would do it.

Only one thing made sense. They had exchanged a master they hated for one they admired, and possibly loved. With the resolve not to leave Delta Valley until he had seen and talked to this man Smoke he turned over and went to sleep.

Smith awakened with the feeling that something had happened during the night. His head hurt, and his exploring fingers felt a lump that had not been there before.

He lay perfectly flat as he looked around. He saw nothing and sat up, feeling for his gun. He was a little surprised to find it still in the holster. He stood up and from force of habit broke open the gun. There wasn't a cartridge in it, nor in his gun belt. It came back to him. Something had happened to disturb him and he had started to raise up. That was all he knew, except a remembrance of pain and sudden blackness. He rushed over to the pack where he had left three boxes of cartridges. They were gone!

"Don't bother looking for them," a cold voice said.

Smith swung around, eyes searching the brush. Nothing. Then he looked up and on top of a steep, rocky promontory overlooking his camp he saw a figure outlined in the uncertain light of dawn; a tall, thin man wearing a black suit, and wide-brimmed black hat.

He said, "I take it you are the undertaker. Will you join me at breakfast before the ceremonies begin?"

The man laughed hollowly, a laugh that broke off in a racking cough. When he could speak again he said, "So Norge sent a gentleman this time. What do you call yourself?"

"A gentleman. The name doesn't matter, Smoke. That's no ordinary cough you have, friend."

"Excuse it. It'll be the death of me some day. Death won't come from the likes of you."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. I didn't come here to bushwhack you, but to challenge you to a duel. You didn't kill me last night when you had the opportunity, so I take it you also consider yourself a gentleman. Shall we settle it like gentlemen?"

Smoke seemed to consider, his teeth gleaming in a smile. "Why not? It would be amusing. But of course as the challenged party it's for me to choose the weapons, the time and the place."

"That's your privilege."

Smoke studied him intently. "In the books there's a name for your kind. Yes, a paladin—a knight in shining armor, armed with a righteous cause and a lance." He shook his head sadly. "And yet you are a mercenary, hiring out to kill for money. What was your price,

Paladin? How much did Norge agree to pay you to kill the dragon?"

"You accepted the challenge. Let's get it over with. Now."

"Without the formalities—and you with an empty gun? No, my impetuous Paladin. Your voice indicates that you may really be a gentleman. I must contrive to keep you around until I make sure."

"I shall object most strenuously to be being tied up while you make up your mind."

Smoke laughed. "That would not be necessary. This valley is itself a prison, and you would be foolish to leave your camp. There are many ways to kill you, but I am anxious to see how a paladin can die. Nobly, I hope."

"Your friends almost made me believe you are a public benefactor, old man, but you are only a sadist."

"Perhaps. But I have seen so much evil in the world that maybe I just want to eliminate as much of it as I can. You came in here without a cause and without a name, and I have given you one. When we bury you we will put a headboard at your grave with the one word, PALADIN on it. Too bad that you are not a real paladin, for one who kills for hire has to be evil. I know, for I have done the same thing myself."

"Old man, you talk too much."

Smoke said, "Since I am a thief, and you will have no further use for your horses I have taken them. I—" He went into a spasm of coughing.

Paladin went over and lighted a fire. The wood was damp and the smoke curled up the precipitous side of the promontory obscuring everything in its path. When it cleared, Smoke had disappeared. Smith searched for a way up to where the man had been, but there was none. Anger built up in him. Smoke probably wasn't over fifty, yet he looked to be a dying old man, playing games with other people's lives. Smith's anger was really at his own helplessness.

He forced his way through the brush and began to scramble over the boulders in an effort to get at his tormentor till a bullet splatted a rock and sent him diving for shelter. The morning was chilly but he found perspiration standing on his face. He returned to his camp and cooked his breakfast.

He waited an hour, then slipped away down the creek with the utmost caution. At last he saw a rocky ledge which he was sure Smoke must have used to reach the promontory, but could find no path leading up to it. Finally in desperation he attempted to climb it. He could see a small tree on the lip of the ledge, with a low bough hanging over it. It was hazardous to take his eyes from the rock he was climbing, even for an instant, yet once in a while he glanced

toward the tree, guiding his course by it. Presently it was just above him and he reached up and caught the overhanging branch that looked strong enough to sustain his weight.

The next moment he heard the crack of a revolver and the branch, half severed by a bullet, broke under his hand and he found himself half falling, half sliding toward the bottom.

He was bruised but not crippled by the fall. As he picked himself up he heard Smoke's eerie laughter from far above; laughter that was interrupted by a fit of coughing. He walked stiffly behind a rocky outcrop, and the coughing presently died away.

He was as long getting back to his camp as he had been coming from it. Mechanically, he started rummaging through his pack for a box of cigars, and saw at once that a handful was missing. He was squatting on his heels when he heard his enemy's voice from the promontory.

"Hope you don't mind me borrowing a few of your cigars, Paladin. An excellent brand."

Too angry to speak, Smith merely glared at his enemy standing there calmly smoking one of his cigars. Then in the middle of a puff Smoke was suddenly racked by coughing. When he recovered he angrily threw the cigar away.

The paroxysm passed and Smoke said, "My lungs deny me the enjoyment of even a quiet, reflective smoke."

"I don't think you will live thirty days after you murder me," the other taunted.

"Murder is an ugly word, Paladin. Are you trying to entice me into spoiling my pleasure?"

"No. As Seneca said, 'No one tries extreme measures at first.' Tell me: what pleasure are you getting out of this?"

"A good question. As a boy I never had a pet, and you do have an intellectual appeal. I find it amusing that a man doomed to death should take time to spout the classics."

"Obviously you intend to talk me to death."

Smoke laughed. "I do enjoy the sound of my own voice—what there is left of it."

"You accepted a challenge."

"Yes, I did. So, to business. There are two ways to fight, Paladin, or to kill. One is in the darkness of night, or the darkness of a man's mind. I could have shot you from ambush a dozen times and the devil, if not St. Peter, would have held me justified. The other way is to face your man eye to eye in broad daylight—and draw your gun."

Smith's lip curled in an impotent grimace. He said, "Throw me just

one bullet and we can settle it eye to eye right now.”

Smoke, relaxed in easy posture, scanned the younger man’s face. Then he shot out, “Draw your gun, Paladin!”

Involuntarily Smith’s hand flashed to his gun before he remembered that it was empty. He said, “So you could call it self-defense. It would be easy to put an empty cartridge in my gun.”

“It would be like killing a child. Draw, Paladin. Show me speed you think would match mine.”

Smoke suddenly slapped the butt of his gun, and through sheer reflex Smith clawed for his empty gun. Had it been a real duel he knew that he would have died before his gun cleared level. Smoke had not been exaggerating when he boasted about his prowess.

Smoke said, “If you want it to be a real contest, nobel Paladin, work at it awhile. Practice. Don’t be in such a hurry to die.”

“Smoke, one way or another I will kill you.”

“Like me, you talk too much,” Smoke jeered. “Now to make the contest have the appearance of being even let me give you advice. Cut the top of that holster off a couple of inches so that you can get at the gun better. The leather is much too soft. Soak it in the creek for an hour or so, then let it dry out stiff. I don’t want you claiming that your gun caught after I kill you.” He took a knife from his belt and tossed it down.

The man at the bottom caught it deftly, and said, “A sense of humor, too. Why don’t you just toss me down a bullet and let us finish the joke?”

“Your armor shines quite brightly, Paladin, but make your arm and your lance worthy to battle the dragon.”

Smoke had reholstered his gun. Spinning half around he drew with a blur of motion and one bullet kicked up dirt within an inch of Smith’s left foot, and another within an inch of his right, and a third struck midway between the feet.

When Smith looked up Smoke was gone.

CHAPTER 2

A slow rage built up in the man who from that day on was to think of himself as Paladin. He had never before played mouse to anybody's cat, and that was the game Smoke was playing. He had been purposely awkward with his mock draw to deceive Smoke, but now he knew that he had never been good enough to beat the man. It was little more than an overnight stay of execution. Smoke was only getting a little morbid enjoyment out of giving him one small false hope.

Still, the man's advice was sound. He believed that sometime soon Smoke would keep his promise to give him a single bullet, and his life could depend on how he used it. He counted himself an excellent shot, but his training had been military; not the fast draw of the West until lately. Now he realized that his life might depend on his mastering that draw—and he had little time.

He took out the knife he had been given and carefully remodeled the top of his holster, then put it to soak as Smoke had instructed. Meantime, he carved out a reasonably close facsimile of his own gun, but just a little larger which he placed inside the holster when he took it out of the creek to dry. When the operation was over his gun fitted the holster loosely, and there was nothing to delay the action when he drew.

He still questioned that Smoke would give him an even break, but there was a chance. The man was dying anyway, and he might want to prove himself just one more time. It would prove nothing to shoot down a helpless man. Had he not witnessed Smoke's bewilderingly fast draw he would have been sure of himself.

He stayed in his blankets till the sun crept over the eastern minarets though he was wide awake, hoping to observe Smoke's movements. It seemed the man had no regular hours for sleeping and he might turn up any time. The people of the valley were devoted to Smoke as Norge had said they would be, but Paladin was sure that Smoke was playing this game alone to satisfy his strange vanity.

A faint, clucking sound caught his attention, and he made out a fat fool hen on a low limb of a tree in careless disregard of danger. It would make a good breakfast. Paladin drew on his boots, picked up a small stone and drew back to take aim. He dropped the stone disgustedly as he heard the crack of a six-shooter and saw the bird plummet to earth with its head shot off.

“Your breakfast, Paladin,” Smoke called from his usual station. “A moment ago you and the fool hen were in the same position. You proved the superiority of our species since you were about to project an extension of your power, though you probably would have missed.”

Paladin looked up slowly, eyes narrowed with hatred. Smoke had him as helpless as the fool hen had been a moment before. The man had meant to emphasize the parallel.

He said, “You should be in bed, old man. A man as near dead from consumption as you are should avoid the night air.”

“I don’t need your advice, Paladin. Death and I have become reconciled—” He broke off in a punishing, strangling cough.

When the seizure ceased Paladin taunted, “There is more dignity in dying than in some ways of living.”

“I am tiring of this game,” Smoke said with brittle anger. “Three more days will be enough. We shall see how much dignity you can scare up when your time comes.” His hands were at his chest for a moment, then he was gone.

Paladin dressed out the fool hen and built his fire. He studied the air currents as he watched the smoke curl upward.

For the next two days he practiced diligently with his empty gun and rebuilt holster, making a little change here and there until he was sure he could draw as fast as he would ever be able to do—and he still wasn’t as fast as Smoke.

He didn’t see Smoke again until the evening of the second day though he frequently heard the man coughing. He took aim again and again at the spot where Smoke always appeared, and the futile, empty click of the hammer intensified his rage. Then Smoke appeared suddenly, and he let the gun back into the holster.

Smoke called, “I’ve been watching you playact all day, and you have the instinct that would make you a success at your trade—if you were going to live to follow it.”

“You said three days, old man. That will be tomorrow.”

“You are in a hurry to rush into the hereafter?”

“Better that than clinging desperately to the remnants of a misspent life as you are doing: knowing that instead of friends you can only try to add one more notch on your gun.”

“You have considerable intelligence, but very little understanding.”

“Maybe more than you think. You court death by a bullet only because you are more afraid of what is gnawing at your insides. Either way your course is run, but you can’t accept death gracefully.”

“A good try, Paladin, but I am old enough to know the folly of losing one’s temper. Before I give you a bullet I’d like to know if you could hit anything if you had one,” Smoke said.

“If I ever turn a bullet loose it will find you.”

“Let us see.” Carefully Smoke placed a cartridge on top of a boulder perhaps fifty feet from where Paladin stood. “Can you see it all right?” he asked.

“I see it.”

“Then draw from the holster and hit it.” Another cartridge fell in the dirt at Paladin’s feet. Paladin picked it up and thrust it into his gun, but when he looked up Smoke was gone—but not his voice.

“Now you won’t be distracted by too many targets,” Smoke called mockingly. “Knock that cartridge off the boulder, my fair lad, and I’ll grant that you may justify Norge’s faith in you.”

Paladin stepped back a pace or two to get a more horizontal shot. He faced the boulder, gun in holster, hands well away from his sides. He drew as he dropped into a crouch, and fired as the gun leveled off. The brass cartridge flew from sight.

A moment later Smoke appeared, a diabolical grin on his gaunt features. He said sardonically: “Now I know that you are indeed a paladin. Anyone else would have had the sense not to waste the one bullet that might have saved your life, for they wouldn’t have had faith that I would keep my word.”

“I trust you to that extent.”

“Then if I give you the chance you owe me a small favor. Of course I intend to kill you, but if by any remote chance I do not I want you to kill Norge. I’m not as wealthy as he but I’ll give you one thousand dollars. Agreed?”

“I won’t murder him, but I’ll do with him as I did with you. I’ll challenge him to a gunfight, and I’ll kill him if he doesn’t leave these people alone. That’s what you want to ensure, isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly what I want. They are the only people who ever really befriended me without asking what there was in it for them.”

Smoke took out pencil and paper, wrote a note and watched it flutter down to Paladin’s feet. The note read: “Mr. Paul Reston: Please pay the bearer, Paladin, the sum of one thousand dollars and charge to my account. Smoke.”

Smoke said: “Now you have the incentive of greed to add to the equally ignoble one of self-preservation. At sunrise then, Paladin, we shall fight our duel.”

He was gone, and the echos of his consumptive cough reverberated through the rocks.

Paladin was up before daybreak, but didn't light his fire until he heard Smoke's racking cough in the distance. This time he laid his fire at the base of the ledge on which Smoke would appear. The wood he had gathered was damp, and would provide more smoke than fire. As he lighted it he watched the smoke spiral upward, clinging to the rock like vapor.

He was about to practice his draw when Smoke appeared. The man said: "The apprenticeship is over, Paladin. Now comes the showdown." A handful of cartridges fell at Paladin's feet.

Paladin picked them up and slowly loaded his gun. The ascending smoke had just reached the top of the ledge, but the man on the ledge was too intent on watching Paladin to notice it. Paladin squinted, shading his eyes with his hand as he looked up. He said, "With the sun behind you and shining into my eyes no wonder you've lived so long."

"It was an advantage I had not intended," Smoke said. He took three steps to the left—into the column of billowing smoke.

"Draw, Paladin," he barked, and his hand blurred to his gun just as the rising smoke reached his face. He stepped back involuntarily as he fired three shots in swift succession. His change of stance and the cough he could not control spoiled his aim. One shot nicked Paladin's side, another his arm, and the third went wild. Paladin aimed carefully, and he did not miss. His bullet struck Smoke squarely in the chest.

For a moment Smoke's body twisted grotesquely on the edge of the ledge. Then it plunged downward, turning over in the air before it struck the creek with a splash.

Paladin leaped forward, caught one of Smoke's legs and dragged him from the water. He straightened the man out and knelt beside him. All anger had vanished from his face.

After a minute or so Smoke's eyes opened, and he coughed blood. When the spasm was over he struggled for breath, then gasped out: "I misjudged you. I granted you guts, but you proved you have brains. The smoke beat me, but I don't mind. My end was destined the first time I fired a gun in anger."

"We are but creatures of our fate—"

"Yes. I read something once about a man losing his way—in a dusky wood—like this."

"In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dusky wood."

"That's it," Smoke nodded. "And there was something about a beast —"

"A leopard for one—"

“Yes. Norge is that leopard, Paladin. The only decent thing I ever did was cage that animal away from these people. Cage him again. You promised.”

“I’ll keep that promise,” Paladin said, and held the man until Smoke lay back exhausted from coughing.

At first he thought the man was dead, then his eyes opened and he said in a voice so low Paladin could scarcely hear, “How long a man must sometime search before he finds himself.”

Wearily, Paladin looked down at the man, but Smoke had more to say. “Your armor does shine brightly, and your arm is strong. Don’t you see, noble Paladin, you’ve slain the dragon but turned the leopard loose. There’s always a leopard loose—somewhere.”

He struggled for a moment in Paladin’s arms, then was dead.

Paladin stood looking down at the man who was even more frail than he had thought. Smoke could have killed him easily, but instead had given him an even break. The only logical explanation was that he had known he was dying and was willing to gamble his life; knowing that he had nothing to lose either way. But it was more complex than that.

Smoke, he believed, had been a frustrated philosopher who had made a study of his fellowman. He had read the books; he knew that he stood far above his fellows in intelligence and disdained being a common workingman. So, he had become an outlaw. He had felt no personal malice against Paladin, yet to him Paladin had been no more than a bug to be studied under a microscope. Yet there had been some good underneath the mask of evil the man chose to wear. Smoke was a man he would never forget.

Paladin’s problem now was to get out of the valley. He had once thought Smoke had a gang, but it wasn’t true. The people of the valley had been loyal to him, but he did his own killing. They could, however, still make trouble for Paladin. First of all he had to get his horses.

He found Smoke’s gun where it had fallen on the creek bank and thrust it under his belt. He walked more than half a mile before he found where Smoke had left his horse to go on on foot. It was a good horse, and the saddle had once been expensive, though it was battered from much use. The stirrups fitted Paladin.

He mounted with mixed feelings. It had been foreordained that only one man would ride out of the canyon on that horse. Fate had decreed that it be he. He couldn’t hate the man he had killed now, but he had no regrets.

As he rode past the scattered houses he recalled that Smoke’s clothes had been black like his own. They were the same height, and

at a distance they could be mistaken for each other. He warned himself that speculation was dangerous.

At the second place he came to he saw a man out in the field with a shovel. It looked like Burton, and the man stopped to stare. Paladin rode slowly toward the man, and was sure it was Burton when the man started to run toward the house. Then the man changed his mind and walked slowly back toward the fence.

"Mr. Burton," Paladin said.

"It—it's you—on Smoke's horse. You killed him!"

"I killed him. He named the game and he lost. Here is his gun. You will note that there are three empty shells in it. There is only one in mine."

Mrs. Burton came running out, her long calico dress flapping against her gaunt legs. "That man!" she cried. "On Smoke's horse."

"He killed Smoke," her husband said.

She said bitterly, "So Norge won at last. Finally he got a murderer who would do his dirty work."

"Norge won nothing," Paladin said harshly. "He will never bother you again."

"We don't understand," Burton said weakly.

"You don't need to. Get help and bring Smoke's body to town. You'll find it by just following the creek. I'll see you in town."

"Mister, you had better keep right on going," Burton said. "People here didn't just admire Smoke. They worshiped him."

"Only the Deity is entitled to worship," Paladin said as he turned his horse.

The few people in front of Reston's store were as speechless as when he arrived, but he could see their shock, and feel their hatred.

Reston came out. His gaze traveled from the horse to Paladin's face. He said, "Mister, we are peaceable folks, but if our hate could kill you'd be a dead man right now."

"I can see that," Paladin said. "I'd like to speak to you alone, Mr. Reston."

"Come into my office."

Paladin followed the man through the cluttered store into a cubbyhole of an office. He didn't invite Paladin to sit.

"Smoke told me he was going to fight a duel with you this morning. It seems that you won."

"It was a fair fight. Smoke fired three shots and I'm bleeding from two of them right now. I fired one shot and was lucky."

Still speaking in a half-puzzled way Reston said, "He told me the

only bullets you could possibly have were the ones he would give you. I must take your word that it was a fair fight. But how did you beat him?"

"I didn't. He was a far better shot than I. His lungs beat him. A coughing man can't shoot straight."

"I see. Last night he told me something I didn't altogether understand. He said, 'That man may slay the dragon and turn the leopard loose. Don't bother him, but watch out for the leopard.' "

"He gave you good advice. Yesterday he gave me this note to give you in case I survived."

Reston studied the paper. "It is Smoke's handwriting, and he directs me to give you a thousand dollars. Your name is Paladin?"

"That is my name."

"Smoke was a good name, too."

Musingly, Paladin quoted Samuel Johnson:

"He left a name, at which the world grew pale,
To point a moral, or adorn a tale."

Reston said: "You probably heard Smoke quote that. He was always quoting things. I'll give you the money. Now will you tell me what it was for?"

"To cage the leopard, my friend. To take Norge off your backs."

"Then I must wish you luck. But don't expect gratitude from the people here. Smoke gave them freedom and protection and, above all, dignity. You had better get out while you can."

"I've got a couple of horses, remember," Paladin reminded.

"I'll send for them. Meantime, you can stay in my back room," Reston offered.

"No, thanks. I would like some whiskey though."

Reston brought a tin cup full, and Paladin splashed some of it on his wounds. Apologizing for bad manners Reston bandaged the flesh wounds.

Paladin asked for more whiskey and carrying the cup in his hand walked outside and seated himself on a bench. He drank the whiskey with relish. The street was filling with people, who tried to look at him without turning their heads. Several women entered the store clutching their skirts as they scurried in and scurried out. It was a thoroughly hostile crowd, but it was not a mob.

After half an hour a boy arrived with Paladin's horses. Paladin took the lead ropes and mounted Smoke's horse. His saddle was back at his late camp and he wouldn't humiliate himself by riding bareback.

A mile from town he met the Burtons and another man bringing Smoke's corpse home in a wagon. They stopped.

"We left your stuff where it was," Burton said.

Mrs. Burton was more articulate. Glaring at Paladin she said, "What kind of a creature are you to come in here and kill a good, kind man for money like he was an animal?"

"Be still, Emma," Burton said. "I guess he can't understand how we feel about Smoke. We were little more than slaves until he came here and ran Norge out and gave us hope instead of despair. To us he was a great and good man. To this man he was something else. Leave us alone, Mister."

Paladin packed his gear, mounted his own horse and rode back to Delta. He made his camp on the outskirts of the village in plain view of the citizens. He was sure that Reston would see to it that he was not molested, but he was not going to leave until he was ready to go, and he was not going to leave Delta Valley until he could visit Smoke's grave.

Smoke had said that a man might spend his entire life trying to find himself, and Paladin didn't intend for it to take him that long. Smoke had helped him by giving him a name and a purpose. As Smoke had known, somebody had to try to right the wrongs of the world—somebody had to be a paladin. He was not nor ever would be a crusader, for he was a lone wolf, and crusaders had to have company. In his own way he would serve the ends of justice. Smoke had taught him much.

He had no visitors; even the curious small boys veered wide of his camp.

The funeral was to be at ten o'clock, and shortly before that hour the bell began to toll, and the people of the valley streamed toward the church. Paladin would not inflict his presence upon them. The services lasted about an hour, then six men carried the casket outside, loaded it into a wagon which the people followed to the cemetery on top of a small hill. After a time they returned to their homes, and no one came near Paladin.

When it was quiet Paladin walked up to the newmade grave and removed his hat. He remained there ten minutes, knowing that he was being secretly watched by every pair of eyes in town.

He murmured: "I would not ask your forgiveness, Smoke, for we would both know that I didn't mean it. I did you a kindness for because of me you went out as you had lived; with a gun in your hand, not surrounded by mewling old women, and men who would seek to honor you by a display of their own weakness."

He put on his hat and started away, then returned to the grave.

“Smoke,” he said, “I’ll bet that you have yourself often read these words from Talleyrand: ‘The reputation of a man is like his shadow—gigantic when it precedes him, and pygmy in its proportions when it follows you.’ ”

He returned to his camp, and was on his way out of Delta Valley before sundown.

CHAPTER 3

He had come into Delta Valley calling himself Smith, and he was leaving it with the name of Paladin. In the past year or so he had used a variety of names but Paladin suited him better than any of them. The knights of Charlemagne had probably been men of his own stamp. It was a name of which a man could be proud. Some lines from Coleridge ran through his mind:

“ ‘Ah!’ replied my gentle fair,
‘Beloved, what are names but air?
Choose thou whatever suits the line;
Call me Sappho, call me Chloris,
Call me Lalage, or Doris,
Only, only call me Thine.’ ”

He already had an honorable name, and he had done nothing to disgrace it, but the exigencies of war and the black heart of a murderer had caused him to lay it aside until the murderer could be found and brought to judgment. To that mission he had dedicated his life.

He owed something to Smoke for having given him a name. Theirs had been a strange vendetta without too much rancor. By the very nature of things one of them had had to die, and Smoke had shown a degree of grim sportsmanship.

They had had something in common besides a mutual hatred for a man named Norge. As a lover of literature he had been amazed to learn that the man he had supposed to be a common outlaw had an acquaintance with the classics. Perhaps there had been other affinities between them.

A man like Smoke would have little use for property, for he had known that death already had its clammy fingers on him. Why, then, had he banished Norge from the valley unless he was a hater of tyranny and injustice? Paladin was sure now that Norge had lied to him about being robbed. He was, as Reston and the others claimed, everything that was evil.

As he rode slowly out through the narrow entrance to the valley he saw a dust a mile away created by a rapidly moving buggy. He rode behind some rocks to wait. He could soon see that the buggy team had all but given out, and the driver was lashing them brutally with a

whip. The man was either in a big hurry or was callously cruel to animals. Then, to his utter amazement, he saw that the man was Norge.

Paladin left his pack horse standing and rode out on a ledge. He was sitting there with his hat drawn over his eyes when Norge saw him.

Norge jerked his team to a sudden stop, and Paladin saw the look of panic on his face. Not until then had Paladin remembered that both he and Smoke were dressed alike in black. Norge must have thought that he was seeing Smoke or he would not have betrayed such abject fear.

Paladin rode down off the ledge. For a minute he was out of Norge's sight, and he didn't miss the look of incredulous relief when Norge saw who it was.

"You!" Norge exclaimed. "For a minute there I thought you were Smoke. Why do you wear those damned black clothes?"

"Clothes are a matter of a man's own choosing."

"Did you kill him?"

"I did—in a duel. You must have had a lot of confidence in me to come back here."

"Reston wired me that Smoke was dead, and for me to come at once. I supposed you had killed him, but he didn't say so."

Smoke must have sent the wire to lure Norge back to Delta Valley even before Paladin had arrived, and he must have been expecting to die, and had wanted to rid the valley of its incubus before he died.

"I kept my word," Paladin said.

"Good. Now I'm going to make those penny ante ranchers grovel like the curs they are," Norge said. He picked up the lines but the team stopped when Paladin said, "Whoa!"

"I don't owe you anything," Norge said.

"But I owe Smoke something," Paladin said. "He paid me to keep you out of this valley, and see to it that you never bother those people again."

"You double-crossing bastard! I ought to—"

"The pleasure will be all mine. You're a disgrace to the human race, Norge. Killing you would be the easiest way to earn my money."

"How much did he offer you?" Norge cried desperately.

"Enough, and I have already received full payment. But I've changed my mind about not letting you enter the valley."

Norge's face changed hopefully. "I knew you'd come around," he said.

"If your horses weren't given out you wouldn't get a foot nearer. I'm thinking of them, not of you. I'll ride back with you."

Most of the people who had been at Smoke's funeral were still around Reston's store. Paladin saw the look of doubt and alarm on their faces as they saw him coming back with Norge.

"Call your people together, Reston," Paladin told the storekeeper. When they gathered around reluctantly Paladin said, "Mr. Norge has something to say to you."

"You bet I have," Norge said loudly. "I want everyone of you to pay up or get out."

"You're reading the wrong lines, Norge," Paladin said. "You meant to tell them that from now on they won't be molested by you in any way, and that you'll never show your face here again after your horses are rested. If you do make any further claim on this valley I'll come after you, and I'll kill you." The words were spoken evenly and quietly, but with deadly intensity. Norge could only gulp.

"Tell them you are through here," Paladin prompted.

Norge looked around wildly. There was something in their faces he had never seen before. "All right," he snarled. "The damned valley ain't worth dyin' for."

"We think it is," Reston stated.

Paladin said, "If Norge ever gives you any trouble you send for me. I'll send you my address."

The humiliation of Norge had worked a complete change in the attitude of the people. Their loyalty to Smoke had shifted to Paladin, and they begged him to stay. He accepted an invitation to have supper, breakfast and a bed in Reston's house. He saw to it that Norge's team was cared for, and Reston allowed the man to unroll his blankets in a back room since Norge was obviously afraid for his life.

In the morning Paladin saw Norge on his way, and warned him against further abuse of his horses. He passed the man a couple of miles out of Delta, and Norge got the idea that Paladin might be waiting for him some place along the road. He would not drive his team as hard on the way back as he had coming in. Paladin himself took his time on his way to Tucson, where he would catch a train.

On his way Paladin did a lot of thinking about his past life, and a man named Breckenridge Helm. Until he found Helm he would remain Paladin—and he had never laid eyes on the man.

He recalled the happy and prosperous home he had known in St. Louis, a home that had been rudely shattered by the outbreak of the Civil War. He had never known poverty, since his father was a partner in the wealthy fur trading firm of Chouteau & Company. They had been very close. His father's business had taken him on many trips to

New York, and once they had gone to Europe. He had liked that, but he had enjoyed the trips to the West more, for he instinctively loved the outdoors. There he had learned to ride and to shoot.

His home life had been entirely different. He had lived in a great house, surrounded by luxury. His mother had been an Atlanta belle of quality and culture. But the War Between the States had been fast approaching, and the sympathies of his parents had been divided. His New York father was strongly for the Union, while his mother was deeply and intensely loyal to the South.

Missouri was a border state, and they had both hoped that it wouldn't be drawn into the struggle. Young Alexander had gone to college in the East, and through the influence of a Missouri senator he had got an appointment to West Point. He had been there when hostilities broke out.

His own sympathies had been with the Union. He had talked it over with his father, and they had agreed that it would be fatal to his mother if she knew he would be fighting against her beloved South. And still he had known that he couldn't keep out of it.

It had taken some influence, but he had been appointed to secret military duty. In short, he had volunteered as a spy. He had been sent to join the Confederate command of General Sterling Price in the Missouri district. His father had been able to tell his mother with a sorrow that was not feigned that her son was serving in a Confederate army.

Within a few weeks a communication line had been set up by which he could report the movements of General Price's army back to General Buell, the Union commander. Though he had not liked it, his father's office in St. Louis had been a clearinghouse for his messages.

There was only one man in General Price's army who had ever known him; a boy two years his junior named Jesse Warner who had worked for his father, and to whom Paladin had been an unwilling hero. Paladin had been fond of Jesse, and in one of the battles he had saved his friend's life. Paladin had felt toward him as if he were a foster brother. Jesse had been attached to General Price as an aide, or dog robber, but Paladin had never got Jesse involved in his own activities.

Then one night Jesse had awakened him in utmost excitement. "You've got to get out of here," Jesse said. "General Price knows that you are a Union spy, and if they catch you you'll be shot in the morning."

"How do you know that?" Paladin had asked.

"There's a counterspy here named Breck Helm. I've never seen him, but I was outside the tent and I heard him talking to General Price. He

was bragging. He said he had found out there was a leak, and he had traced it to your father's office."

"Go on," Paladin said as the boy seemed to hesitate.

"I hate to tell you this but Helm told the general that he and his men had killed your father to keep him from getting word back to you. General Price didn't seem to like it, but your father is dead."

Paladin had felt a great wave of grief, along with a desire to lay his hands on the man who had murdered his father. His mother's health was poor and the blow would kill her when she learned that her husband and son had deceived her.

"You don't know what this man Helm looks like?" he queried.

"No, I've never seen him—only in shadow—and heard his voice. He speaks like an educated man and he is as tall as you are and maybe a little thinner. There is just one other thing. I heard the general tell him that he hadn't liked him associating with the Quantrill gang. Helm told him that there was where he got a lot of his information."

"That may help."

Jesse said, "I risked my neck to warn you, and you've no time to lose."

"Go on back, and thanks. Maybe I can help you some time," Paladin said.

He barely had time to get his horse from the picket line before a party came looking for him. He knew how summarily spies were dealt with, and had it not been for Jesse Warner he would have been facing a firing squad at sunrise instead of riding up to the house of an Ozark farmer.

The man would not refuse breakfast to a Confederate officer, and Paladin won his confidence enough that with the aid of five dollars the farmer let him have a pair of butternut pants and a shirt and a lunch for a Negro servant he claimed he had left out in the timber.

Once in the woods he donned the farmer's clothes and hid his uniform and saddle in a thicket and rode on bare-back. The next day he was picked up by half a dozen of Quantrill's guerrillas. He told them with the grin and the best hillbilly accent he could manage that he was looking for Quantrill to join up.

"That's an officer's hat and boots you're wearing," they told him. "Where did you git 'em?"

"Tuk 'em off'n an officer," he grinned. "He was daid."

He was taken to Quantrill's camp and cross-examined by the guerrilla leader. He quickly broke down and confessed that he was a deserter, and had murdered the officer and his aide who had tried to arrest him, and had taken the officer's gun, hat and boots. Quantrill

believed him, and he was permitted to join the camp.

He had ridden with Quantrill three months, letting his hair and beard grow, but he neither saw nor heard of a man named Breck Helm. He was in a number of raids and had been appalled at the brutality of his companions. Once he had been accused of cowardice and had challenged his accuser to a duel. The man had chosen knives as weapons, and it had been fought under frontier rules with the men's wrists tied together by a handkerchief. It had taken Paladin a couple of weeks to recover, but his antagonist had been buried on the spot.

Later, he had deserted a band of guerrillas and warned the small settlement they meant to attack. He had helped defend the place and a number of guerrillas had been killed.

Gradually he had worked his way back to St. Louis only to learn that his mother had never recovered from the shock of her husband's death and had followed him within a week. He had an uncle, Ben, who told him that she had learned of his and his father's activities in behalf of the Union following the brutal murder, and he knew that this had contributed to her death. It intensified his determination to find Breck Helm some day.

He had finished out the war in the cavalry guarding the mail route against Indian attacks, and when it was over had returned to St. Louis. There was not much left of his father's business though his uncle was striving mightily to make a go of it. Unable to settle down to business he had gone west again, and had finally established himself at the Carlton Hotel. His uncle had sent him a monthly remittance, most of which had gone to paying a detective agency to help him locate Breck Helm. About all they could tell him was that a man of that name had been seen in San Francisco, but he could obtain no physical description of the man.

Paladin had been there a year when he got into the poker game with Norge. If Helm was in the city the man had surely changed his name.

In the meantime he had been recognized by a Quantrill man who had tried to kill him. That, surely, was the duel which Norge claimed to have seen him fight. There were various outlaw gangs throughout the West, and it was known that many of them had been Quantrill men. Paladin hadn't known them all, but he was sure that sooner or later he would encounter more of them that he did know.

CHAPTER 4

A little more than two weeks after he had come to Arizona Paladin rode into the town of Tucson and stopped at a livery stable.

"How much will you give me for the outfit just as it stands?" he asked the stable owner.

The man began to haggle but Paladin cut him short. "I'll take three hundred dollars for the horses, saddle and everything. It's less than it's worth, but I won't give it away. Make up your mind right now."

The stableman looked at Paladin with the horse trader's gleam in his eye, but saw something in Paladin's boring gaze that changed his mind. "I'll take it," he said. "Take a little time to raise the cash."

"Bring it to me at that saloon over there in an hour," Paladin instructed. He removed his war bag from the saddle, gave his horses a farewell pat and walked over to a hotel. He shaved, took a hasty bath and went down to the saloon he had indicated.

He was quaffing a beer when the stableman came in and handed him three hundred dollars, which Paladin stuck into his wallet. He hadn't yet finished his beer when two men in cowboy garb walked up to him. "Our boss over there in the corner wants to see you," one of them said in a voice that offended Paladin by its arrogance.

"I seem to be the cynosure of all eyes anyway; there's nothing to prevent his looking," Paladin said.

"Smart guy, huh? The boss don't like smart guys."

"His privilege."

"Maybe you don't listen good," the fellow said. "That's the boss settin' over there in that corner. You prance over there, or do you want to do it with a gun in your ribs?"

Paladin glanced toward the corner and the man who had sent for him. *Military man*, he thought, *and a Southerner*. The man looked to be tall, slender and flat-bellied. He was perhaps forty-five years old, and his yellow mustache was tinged with gray. He wore a wide-brimmed white hat and a corduroy suit and a pair of long-gauntleted gloves heavily ornamented with beadwork was in his right hand. He was tapping his knee impatiently with them as he waited.

"And whose gun in my ribs might that be?" Paladin asked, as the bartender refilled his glass. He whirled and threw the beer into the face of the spokesman, and with almost the same motion drove his fist into the stomach of the other man; doubling him over and dropping

him on his haunches. He drew his gun and jammed it against the belly of the man with beer in his eyes.

“Go tell your boss that he is just as able to walk as I am,” he commanded.

“You’ll be—”

More crisply Paladin barked, “Go tell him.”

The fellow wiped his face with his sleeve then shuffled toward the corner of the room. The man who had had the breath knocked out of him staggered to his feet then collapsed in a chair at a card table.

The man with the gray and yellow mustache continued to stare at Paladin while his agent delivered the message. Then, presently, he got up and walked to the bar.

His bearing was certainly military, and his hard blue eyes were those of a man accustomed to command, but when he spoke it was in the precise accent of an educated Easterner. He said, “So you don’t like to take orders.”

“Not even from my friends; certainly not from strangers.”

“Then we start out even. Might I know your name?”

“Paladin—not that it’s any of your business.”

“It’s an odd name, very probably an alias. I’m rather proud of my own. I’m Captain Timothy Slater, 12th Iowa Infantry.”

Paladin let it pass.

“You’re not impressed. You’re not an army man I take it.”

“You take it right.”

“Anyway, the war is over. Have a drink with me.”

“First, I’d like to know why you thought I would come running because you sent your gunmen over to threaten me.”

“It was a test. If you had come running I’d have had no use for you. I’m hiring gunmen, and you didn’t cut the top off that holster just to be whittling, my friend. I’ll pay you twenty dollars a day. I’m having a little trouble out in Nevada with trespassers on some mining property I own. It’s good money.”

“And without money honor is nothing but a malady, an ancient Roman said,” Paladin remarked.

“I’m not buying your honor; I just want to hire your gun.”

“Captain Slater, I have a feeling that if I ever engage in your little private war it’ll be on the other side,” Paladin said.

Captain Slater’s eyes hardened even more as he said, “In which case it might pay me to eliminate a possible enemy now.”

“Man to man, or me against your mob?”

“It need not be either one if you take the first train out of here,”

Slater said coldly.

"You make Tucson sound singularly attractive," Paladin said. "Good day, sir."

Captain Slater, ramrod straight, returned to his table, and his men gathered around him. Presently they all went out.

Paladin learned that there was a train leaving for the west that evening, and another in the morning. He had paid for a bed for the night, and he meant to use it. Later that evening he saw Slater and about a dozen of his men get on the westbound train. After he had had supper he went back to the same saloon and was soon in a poker game.

"Quite a little fracas you had here this afternoon," one of the players said.

Paladin nodded with a quick smile; attentive, but not curious, and the man went on: "I heard that army officer introduce himself. So happens I was in the 12th Iowa, and damned if I can remember any Captain Slater in it."

Something prickled at Paladin's spine, but he said, "He looked like an army man."

"Yeah, but which army?" the man said dryly.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't know. But he said his first name was Timothy, and I heard one of his men call him Breck and get jawed out about it. Slater reminded him that he was to be called captain. Now Breck is short for Breckenridge, and that is purty much a Southern name."

"Others do bear it," Paladin said, but the prickling at the back of his neck increased. Was it possible that he had talked with the man he had sworn to kill without knowing it? If Slater had lied about being a Union officer he could have lied about his name. It was the nearest thing to a clue he had had since he had been free to look for the man.

"Do you know where Slater is heading?" he asked.

"Not for sure, but I did hear them mention some place called Pioche," his informant said.

He played poker with indifferent success and finally announced that he was going to bed. It was a short walk to the hotel, and since Slater had left town he was not particularly alert. Then as he was passing an outside stairway to a rooming house he suddenly felt a gun barrel against his back.

"Walk down the alley," a harsh voice commanded. Another man joined them and he felt his gun lifted. Robbery, he supposed, was the motive, and he should have left the money in his money belt with the clerk at the hotel, but he had never pictured himself as the victim of a

holdup. His never too placid temper smoldered, but these two seemed to know their business.

The alley grew dimmer the farther they went. They made him stop at a board fence and rest his elbows on it.

"I like to take a man's money when he's standin' up," the man said. He jerked Paladin's shirttail out of his pants and quickly discovered the money belt, which he passed to his companion.

"What's your name, bucko?" the fellow demanded.

"What difference does it make?"

"A lot, if you're the man I think you are."

"Shakespeare said, 'What's in a name—' which doesn't mean that I have to give you mine."

"You're goin' to give us your name, bucko. If you give the right one we may let you live awhile."

Paladin guessed that this fellow was probably a Mississippi River man by his use of the word bucko. He was familiar with the type. They were ruthless cutthroats, and could well have been Quantrill men. "Why the great interest in my name? I take it you work for Captain Slater, and I told him who I was."

"And you lied." A fist in the stomach doubled Paladin over, made him gasp for breath. "Now let's have the truth."

When Paladin didn't answer the bully struck him in the face. Blood ran down over Paladin's mustache. Deadly fury ran through his brain as he staggered back against the fence, feigning an injury he did not feel. The man who had hit him was careless; the other, a hulking moron, stood back with a grin on his face.

Paladin had noticed a loose board on the fence, a one-by-six about four feet long. If he couldn't use it he was finished. He caught the top of the board with both hands and wrenched it loose. As the nails squealed protestingly both outlaws went for their guns, but they were a little late. Paladin caught the leader across the side of the head with the board and knocked him end over end. He hurled the board at the other man, who threw up both hands protectingly. Paladin charged him like an angry bull, and butted him viciously in the stomach.

There was force enough to jar the fellow loose from his gun, but Paladin reached for his weapon which the man had stuck carelessly under his belt.

Neither ruffian was unconscious, but the one was dazed and the other had had the breath jolted out of him. With his own gun in his hand he collected their weapons and threw them over the fence. He retrieved his money belt, then with a bowie knife from one of the men's belts he slashed their belts and then their suspenders. As a final

gesture he slit open the back of their trousers from waist to crotch.

He said, "Get going, gentlemen. Your appearance is not fastidious, but if you keep a tight grip both fore and aft you need not offend the standards of decency, which among your associates I presume is not high. I'm afraid I'll have to report this to the sheriff."

The man he had hit with the board had an ear that was already swollen to twice its normal size, and that side of his head was covered with blood. He was a broad-shouldered, heavy-set man with ragged red whiskers, probably about fifty years old, and he was too furious to hold his tongue. He grated: "I saw you with Quantrill, and I know you betrayed our boys to the damn Yankees, and four of 'em were killed. Nobody ever made a fool of Hillary Hatcher and got away with it. Some day I'll get you, and when I do—"

He turned away, then grabbed at his pants that had fallen down around his knees. They walked back up the alley as if they were hobbled.

Paladin scratched his memory for a man named Hatcher, and was quite sure he had heard it before, but couldn't remember having ever seen either of the men.

He had cut the combs of these two cocks, but until he got out of Tucson he would have to watch out for them. He murmured, "Wise old Terence said that true wisdom consists not in seeing what is immediately before our eyes, but in foreseeing what is to come."

Many of Quantrill's men had never seen him, but they knew the name he had been using at the time, which accounted for Hatcher's efforts to make him identify himself. He had struck one effective blow against them, and revenge was a part of their nature.

Quantrill's men were scattered throughout the West, and the opprobrium of their reputations would keep them from revealing themselves. It was highly improbable that they operated as a gang, but if two of them got together they would make a team. He was sure that he had just encountered one of them.

He had thought when they surprised him that robbery was their motive, but it was more than that. Captain Slater and Breck Helm might or might not be the same man, but he had missed an opportunity to find out more about Slater. Breck Helm would be looking for him just as hard as he was looking for Helm and he was reasonably certain now that Hatcher and the other man had been working on orders from Captain Slater.

He had got his money back, and now he gathered up the outlaws' guns and returned to his hotel. He didn't have time to look up the sheriff the next morning before catching his train so he gave the bandits' guns to the hotel clerk.

He said, "I'd like you to deliver these to the sheriff. They belong to a pair that tried to rob me last night, and I told them where they could get their guns back. Tell the sheriff one of them is a man named Hatcher, and he should have an ear as big as a cabbage."

The clerk stared, goggle-eyed. "You mean you were held up, and you took their guns away from the bandits?" he asked incredulously.

"They didn't donate them to me," Paladin said dryly.

The net result of his trip to Delta Valley was that he now had two, and perhaps three groups of enemies who would like to bring about his demise. Norge and his hirelings were of course one. Hatcher and other, members of the Quantrill guerrillas were another; Captain Slater might be an independent foe, but he could have been associated with Quantrill. If he was indeed Breck Helm then it was a certainty that he had been.

On the other side of the ledger he had set free a group of honest but defenseless settlers. Had he not killed Smoke the man would have died soon anyway, and Norge would have come back to take over. There were other tyrants and oppressors, and other helpless people who needed to be set free. *He had given himself the name of Paladin*, he thought. *Why not try to live up to it?* What better occupation could a man have than ridding the earth of a few people who never should have encumbered it? It was worth a little thought.

He ate his breakfast and walked to the depot as he heard the locomotive whistle. Two weeks later he was back in San Francisco after a leisurely trip up the coast in a steamship.

As Paladin's cab stopped in front of the Carlton the Chinese porter whom everyone called, Hey Boy, rushed out on the sidewalk with a wide grin of welcome on his yellow face. Paladin liked him because he had the knack of doing the right thing at the right time, and because he was friendly without being obsequious. His bow was respectful but not too deep.

He said, "Ever'boday miss you very much. Whatever you go for I hope you get."

"I always get what I go for. Take my stuff up to my room."

"Very good. You notice I say very, not 'velly' good."

"I did notice it—the second time. Velly good. Jonathan Swift said that the chameleon who is said to feed upon nothing but air, has of all animals the nimblest tongue. I think you are a chameleon, Hey Boy."

"That is bad animal?"

"Quite the contrary. It is a lizard that changes color whenever it is necessary not to be noticed. On a brown limb it is brown, on a green branch it is green. It keeps out of trouble."

“Then I am chameleon,” Hey Boy grinned. “Nobody, see me—I see nothing.”

“Jonathan Swift said something else,” Paladin said. “ ‘As universal a practice as lying is, and as easy as it seems, I do not remember to have heard three good lies in all my conversation, even from those who were most celebrated in that faculty.’ But your lies are pretty good, Hey Boy.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith.”

“You mean you’ve forgotten my name already?” Paladin said sternly. “My name is Paladin. Don’t forget it again.”

Hey Boy didn’t turn a hair. “Very good, Mr. Paladin. You like name, I like name.”

Paladin followed Hey Boy up to the room and gave him a dollar tip. He shaved, bathed, and changed into his usual city apparel and went down to the desk.

“Welcome back, Mr. Smith,” the clerk said. “We held your room for you as you asked.”

“Thank you. I suppose I owe you a slight balance. I’ll pay that now, and I’d like to put a thousand dollars in your safe.”

“Excellent, Mr. Smith,” the clerk beamed. “Is there anything else I can do for you?” A customer with a thousand dollars in the safe was always welcome.

“Yes, there is. I wish to change my registration.” He spun the register around and signed PALADIN in high bold letters.

The clerk scanned the signature and said, “Any time you want to change your name again, Mr. Paladin, just let us know.”

Paladin nodded with a little involuntary mannerism he had of dropping his head and lifting his eyebrows which gave him a slightly Satanic expression.

He went out to look up an engraver and handed the man a drawing he had made on shipboard. In the upper left hand corner was the replica of a chess knight. In the center was the word PALADIN. And underneath were the words, HAVE GUN—WILL TRAVEL.

“Make me up five hundred of these business cards,” he ordered. He had deliberately chosen his career as a professional enemy of the opportunists who took advantage of the unwary and the helpless. He didn’t consider himself in any sense a crusader, but his services would be at the disposal of those who had a just cause. The first card would be sent to Mr. Reston in Delta Valley.

CHAPTER 5

Paladin could rough it when necessary, but he enjoyed luxury and fine living. He also enjoyed the society of beautiful and intelligent women and as soon as he had ordered his dinner in the crowded dining room of the Carlton he looked around him, paying considerably more attention to the women than to the men.

One in particular caught his eye, and he was not displeased to catch her looking at him with undeniable interest. She was tall and remarkably straight, the golden hair piled on top of her head adding to the illusion of height. She was at least a head taller than her somewhat fidgety escort whom Paladin dismissed as a typical businessman though he seemed to be trying to act debonair by twisting the ends of his small waxed mustache and being overly solicitous of his dinner companion. The young lady scarcely seemed to notice his attention.

She had the creamy complexion of a Scandinavian, and when her blue eyes met Paladin's squarely he was the first to look away. But she was, he thought, quite the most beautiful woman he had seen in San Francisco—and it was famous for beautiful women.

He had ordered pheasant under glass and a bottle of fine champagne, and when it was brought he took his time, intending to make the most of it. The waiter stood back deferentially, knowing that this was a man who knew what he was doing, and would not be hurried but could be depended on for a generous tip.

From time to time Paladin glanced at the young woman, and always caught her looking at him. The last time their gaze locked it was she who looked away, invitingly he thought. He was not too much surprised when her escort came over to his table.

The man said, "I am Jared Carter of the shipping firm of Bostwick and Ewing. My companion, Miss Ingrid Johansen, has an idea that you may have met, Mr.—"

"The lady does remind me of someone. We may possibly have met," Paladin said.

Carter said stiffly, "She asked if you would be so kind as to stop at our table when you have finished your dinner."

"It will be a pleasure," Paladin said. "My card may help her to remember." He handed Carter a card on which the ink was scarcely dry. Carter glanced at it, gave a start, and with an awkward bow returned to the lady.

Paladin did not hurry his leisurely meal. The chances were that the card would send her scurrying out, and if it did not, waiting might whet her curiosity. He saw Carter order another bottle of wine and knew that she was going to stay.

He finished his dinner, signed the check, tipped the waiter, then walked over to the other table.

“Miss Johansen?” he asked politely.

“Yes. And you are Mr. Paladin. Your card intrigues me. Won’t you please sit down?” Her pleasant voice held a slight suggestion of a Swedish accent.

“Delighted.” He took a chair, and Carter seated himself reluctantly.

“Then you two have met?” Carter asked skeptically.

“Assuredly.”

“Why didn’t you come over before?” Miss Johansen queried mischievously.

He replied, “Euphues, one of my favorite wits, once said, ‘It never hath been hurtful to any to hold his peace; to speak, damage to many; what so is kept in silence is hushed, but whatsoever is babbled out cannot be recalled.’ ”

She answered, “If I am not mistaken that same Euphues also said, ‘Mistrust no man without cause; neither be you credulous without proof.’ ”

“I see you are familiar with *The Anatomy of Wit*. I would also say that you are Swedish.”

“Danish. My father is what they call a timber baron. I wonder if you would have potlatch with me tomorrow.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what it is, but I accept,” Paladin smiled.

“It’s an Indian word meaning what you Americans would call a potluck feast, I think. Anyway, when the Indians get together to have a powwow they call it a potlatch. There’s a river by that name up in Idaho where my father does his lumbering. I thought it might interest you.”

“It does, immensely.”

“Shall we say one o’clock then?”

“Inga, I must warn you—” Carter began.

“I’m quite capable of taking care of myself, Jared,” the girl said.

Paladin stood up. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow, Miss Johansen,” he said.

“Good night, Mr. Paladin.”

“Good night to you both,” he bade them.

She had probably sent for him out of idle curiosity, or because she

was bored, but she didn't want to talk to him in the presence of Carter. When he looked back Carter was vehemently protesting to her about something.

He played poker for a while before going up to his room. As he opened the door moonlight poured in from a window. There was a full-length mirror on the door, and as he closed it he caught a glimpse of an image that should not have been there. He made a twisting, sideways dive a moment before a gun roared and the mirror shattered.

Paladin knocked over a couch behind which he knew the assassin had crouched, and bowled the man over. With one hand at the throat he twisted the gun out of the fellow's hand with the other.

Paladin drew his gun as he got to his feet. "Don't try it," he said, as the man eyed the window. The man whirled and struck desperately at Paladin. He missed, and the barrel of Paladin's gun crashed down on his head. The man sprawled unconscious over the overturned couch.

Paladin lighted the overhead gas lamp, and doused a pitcher of water in the fallen man's face. His expression was grim and hard. The man gasped and sat up. Paladin seized him roughly and slammed him into a chair.

"That was foolish," Paladin said. "You've got some explaining to do." He was puzzled. The man didn't look at all like a hired killer. He was young, not over twenty-one, well dressed, and he was desperately frightened.

"I had to try to kill you," he stated dejectedly.

"Yet you never saw me before. What's your name?"

"Roderick Jefferson. And I'm no good to myself, my family, or the human race."

"Agreed. Black sheep of the family. They threw you out so you tried to make it by gambling, and had your IOU's called. The man who holds them promised to tear them up if you would kill me. His name is Norge."

"H-how did you know that?"

"Because I had the same experience, and because Norge would like me dead." Paladin's grim expression began to change to one of amusement. It was like Norge to try to have him killed this way, but he had chosen a poor instrument.

There was a rap on the door and a moment later Hey Boy stuck his head inside the room; surveying the two men, the upset furniture and the broken mirror.

"Downstairs clerk say he hear upstairs noise," he bleated. "You want police, Mr. Paladin?"

Paladin glanced at young Jefferson who sat with a beaten, hopeless

look, and shook his head. "No police, Hey Boy," he said. "Just congratulate the downstairs clerk on his acute hearing."

Hey Boy looked at the broken mirror and clucked his tongue. "Seven years' bad luck," he said.

"You've picked up too many American superstitions, Hey Boy."

Hey Boy gave Jefferson a disapproving look, then glided from the room, making clucking sounds with his tongue.

Paladin said, "Now, Mr. Roderick Jefferson, what are your future plans—make another attempt to kill me?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry I tried it this time. You should have killed me. I wouldn't care if you did it now."

"Suppose I ask you to go into court and swear that Norge hired you to kill me?"

"If I have to, but I'd rather die."

"How much are your IOU's that Norge holds?"

"Six thousand dollars. He said if I didn't kill you he would present them to my father for payment. Oh, my father would pay it to avoid the disgrace to the family name, but I'd rather kill myself than make any more trouble for them. That's what I'll do. My life is finished."

"At twenty-one. Have you ever thought of working and trying to make a man of yourself?"

"I've never worked. I've never done anything useful."

"Do you know where Norge is?" Paladin asked.

"Yes. He's staying at the Pacific Hotel. He told me to report to him there."

"All right, let's go file our report."

Wonderingly, dully, the young fellow followed Paladin out. The Pacific Hotel was two blocks away, and they climbed two flights of stairs and knocked on a door. Norge's gravelly voice bellowed, "Come in."

Norge was alone, in the room; a bottle of whiskey on a table in front of him, but he was not drunk. He half rose to his feet and a look of sickly fear crossed his face as he saw Paladin; a fear that increased by sight of Roderick Jefferson.

"What do you want?" he demanded thickly.

"Need you ask?"

"Who is that fellow?"

"You should never try the same trick twice, Norge. Jefferson wasn't as successful as I was with Smoke. I want his IOU's."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Hand 'em over."

Norge looked up like a coyote trapped in a chicken coop; then reached in a drawer and handed the IOU's to Paladin. "This is robbery," he claimed. "He lost the money to me fair and square."

Paladin stuck the notes into his vest pocket. He said, "I came here to kill you, Norge. You're wearing a gun. Go for it."

"No. I wouldn't stand a chance. You're persecuting me, Paladin, if that's what your name is. You drove me away from my property, and forced me to try to get rid of you."

"You never owned a stick of property in your life that you didn't steal, Norge. Do you think I'd let you go, knowing that you'd only send someone else to shoot me in the dark?"

Rod Jefferson said, "Give me a gun, Paladin, I'll fight him. It's my quarrel anyway."

"Keep out of it," Paladin said curtly. "How badly do you want to live, Norge?"

"I'll pay you anything. I've got money."

"Open your safe, let's see how much you've got."

Norge was almost weeping as he opened the safe, and at command counted out the gold and currency it contained. It amounted to fourteen thousand dollars.

"I'm not going to rob you, Norge," Paladin said, "but I'm going to put you under bond to keep the peace. Write down what I tell you, Jefferson."

Jefferson drew up a chair, and Paladin dictated: "To the Bank of San Francisco: You are hereby authorized to hold in escrow the sum of fourteen thousand dollars for a term of five years. If at the end of that time I produce a release from a man called Paladin whose signature is herewith enclosed, the amount will be returned to me. If I fail to produce such a release you are hereby authorized to donate the entire sum to charity."

"I need this money," Norge whined.

"Sign your name."

Norge scrawled his signature, and Paladin and Rod Jefferson signed as witnesses. Paladin signed at the bottom.

"Meet me at the bank at eleven o'clock tomorrow," Paladin directed. "If you're not there the money will be forfeited."

"I should have you arrested."

"Try it," Paladin smiled. "Attempted murder, and conspiracy to commit a crime will put you away for a long while."

Norge glared after them as they left the room.

"What about the IOU's?" Jefferson asked.

"I'm holding them till I see if you're around if I happen to need you, or until you get a job and prove to me that you're willing to work. I can still present them to your father, you know," Paladin told him.

"I guess I'm your boy," Jefferson grinned.

"Roderick," Paladin said, "I might just possibly take a notion to make a man of you yet."

It had been a good evening. Paladin had met an interesting and beautiful woman, and he had effectually handcuffed Norge. It was better than killing him.

He ate a late leisurely breakfast, and at a quarter past eleven walked to the bank. Norge was waiting uneasily at the corner.

"Look here, Paladin," the man said, "why don't we just split the money and forget the whole business?"

Paladin answered, "Norge, my conscience is upbraiding me already for not killing you. Don't test it any more. Come on."

They entered the bank and handed over the money and the escrow agreement to a vice-president. "Which of you is Mr. Norge?" the official asked.

"I am, and that's my money," Norge said.

"And you are Mr. Paladin?"

Paladin nodded. "Get it straight, Mister. This money is not to be withdrawn for five years, and then only if Norge can produce my signature on a release. If he can't you are to give the money to charity. You agree, don't you, Mr. Norge?"

"Yes, I agree," Norge said morosely.

"What happens if I die before the five years are up?" Norge demanded when they were outside the bank.

"It goes to charity. See to it that you don't put me in a charitable frame of mind," Paladin advised him.

Paladin left him and went back to the Carlton to keep his engagement with Ingrid Johansen. She was late, as he had expected her to be, but she was worth waiting for. She was even taller than he had thought, perhaps no more than two or three inches shorter than he was, and Paladin stood six feet.

Today her hair was in two long golden braids coiled around the back of her head. Her wine-colored dress reached to her shoe tops. She wore black shoes and black silk stockings, and a saucy red turban of a hat. Everything about her was *chic*. She was full-bosomed, but trim as a thoroughbred racehorse. Paladin took her in with a long, admiring look.

She held out her hand. "I'm glad you could keep our appointment, Mr. Paladin."

"It's one I wouldn't have missed," he said gallantly. He seated her and she smiled an acknowledgment. The food she ordered indicated that she was a person of health and vitality.

"I've been up since seven, but I presume you have been up much longer," she said.

"No, I'm lazy. I've been up only three or four hours."

"I'm amazed. You look like what my father calls the up-and-at-'em type. Just what do you do, Mr. Paladin?"

"You saw my card."

"It was a very clever one. A knight. I should have suspected something of the kind. I would say though that you have fitted the name to the occupation, rather than the occupation to the name."

No fool this girl, he thought. He said: "The ugliest of trades have their moments of pleasure. Now if I were a gravedigger, or even a hangman, there are some people I could serve with a great deal of enjoyment."

Inga said: "My father is descended from the Vikings. But he, like you, Sir Knight, is a throwback who is living later than his time. He is a completely ruthless plunderer, but I love him."

It would be nice to be loved by her, though not necessarily in a filial way, Paladin's thoughts wandered. The practical part of him said softly, "And he is in trouble."

"Practically always, but he thrives on it. But there have been three attempts on his life in the last ninety days, and unless we can find out who is trying to murder him, one of these days I'm going to find myself an orphan. I shouldn't like that." Her blue eyes studied him, and they were troubled.

"You didn't decide that I was the man to help you just by looking at me."

"Actually, I had that impression the moment I saw you. Your card confirmed it. Will you go back to Idaho with me, Mr. Paladin?"

"And here I was thinking that it was my virile, manly beauty that had caught your eye," he teased.

"Please don't joke. I like the mountains and the timber, but Eric—that's what I call my father—sent me down here because he is afraid something might happen to me up there. I'm going back, and I'll need a bodyguard. Not only that, but I want somebody who will find out who is trying to ruin my father," she said earnestly.

"I was thinking of going in the other direction, Miss Johansen."

"Call me Inga. Would five thousand dollars interest you?"

“Very much. Very much indeed. But I am not a detective.”

“If you can find who is responsible for these murder attempts I will give you five thousand dollars. Whether you can or not I’ll pay you five hundred dollars a month as long as you work for me.” She opened her reticule and counted out five hundred dollars in large bills.

He didn’t reach for the money. “What is your father going to think about you going back to Idaho?”

“He isn’t going to like it. He doesn’t think I’ll be safe up there. Perhaps you can convince him that I’ll be safe with you along as my bodyguard.”

“Or he might think that I am a fortune hunter,” Paladin objected. “You are a very attractive woman, Inga, and I might fall in love with you.”

“And I with you,” she smiled at him. “But don’t worry, I am already engaged to my father’s business manager. His name is Arthur Norton.”

“I was afraid it was Carter,” he sighed.

“He is a mouse, though a very sly one. He is supposed to be looking after me down here.”

“In which case I think you may be in more danger down here than you would be up there,” he said. “When do we start?”

“Tomorrow. I feel ever so much relieved.” She reached over and touched his hand.

CHAPTER 6

Paladin had not counted on leaving San Francisco so soon, and he had other plans that would have to wait. As yet he wasn't inclined to take Miss Johansen very seriously, but he reached over and picked up the money she had left on the table and put it in his wallet. It sealed whatever bargain they had made, and he wasn't quite sure just what it was; or what was really expected of him.

"The main thing," she said, "is absolute secrecy. My father must not know that I am coming, and that means that Jared Carter must not know that I am leaving."

"But he will know that you have gone."

"Not necessarily. He would expect me to go back the way I came down, which would be by sea as far as Portland, then up the river on one of those funny little stern-wheelers as far as Lewiston, and from there to the Potlatch by stage. But we are going in the other direction."

"Which is clear as river mud."

"I will tell Carter that I am going up to Sacramento on a river boat to visit friends. We shall catch a train from there as far as a place in Nevada called Winnemucca. There is a stage line from there to Boise, and we will catch another to Lewiston by way of Walla Walla. Nobody will know we are on the way until we arrive," she said.

"Women have put more spokes in the wheel of destiny than the gods ever contemplated," he commented.

"I'll give you the money to buy the tickets." She reached again into her reticule.

"Just your own fare," he told her. "I'll pay my own way, and besides I'm taking a young man with me."

"Who is he?"

"Just a young fellow who tried to murder me. I'd like you to have your father give him a job."

"That's not a very strong character reference."

"I'll vouch for him."

"That's enough. Our boat leaves at ten in the morning."

"You'll have supper with me tonight—without Mr. Carter?"

"I'm sorry. Mr. Carter must be appeased, so the less we are seen together the better. But I have enjoyed the lunch."

Eric Johansen and his troubles interested Paladin very little, but his

daughter did. He had never seen a woman like her. He had had fair warning that romance wasn't involved, but he was sure that she wasn't much in love with her fiancé. It would be interesting to see how it came out.

Paladin hunted up Rod Jefferson and told him they were going on a trip to the wilds of Idaho. "And when we get up there you are going to work if it kills you," he added.

"It probably will," Rod said wryly.

With time on his hands and money in his pocket Paladin got into a poker game, and before he quit he had doubled his money.

He had never bothered much about business and finance. As a boy he had had all the money he wanted. Had it not been for the war he would probably have followed a business career, but he had been glad to turn what remained of his father's business over to his uncle. Now he was strictly on his own since he had told his uncle he no longer needed a monthly remittance.

He had little hope that the job with Inga Johansen would last very long, and he didn't count at all on earning the five thousand dollars she had promised. It was enough that it would take him to new places, and that he was employed.

Finding Breck Helm was still his real purpose in life, and he had intended to go looking for Captain Slater to find out if Slater and Helm were one and the same man. It had taken him years to learn patience, but he had finally learned the lesson. Now, instead of hunting blindly for the game he would wait for the game to come to him.

In the morning Rod Jefferson was on hand with a canvas portmanteau, eager for whatever adventure lay ahead. His pessimism had departed and he greeted Paladin cheerfully.

"You know," he said, "I think we have hoodooed old Norge. He lost money last night, and he was cursing his luck when he quit the game."

"Did you hand out any more IOU's?" Paladin demanded.

"Nobody would take 'em," Rod grinned.

"Don't expect me to bail you out again," Paladin warned.

Inga was waiting on the dock, wearing a light summer dress and a picture hat. Carter was hurrying up with a small bag, so they expressed surprise at meeting each other.

"You certainly look as though you expected to rough it," Paladin whispered cynically.

Inga turned to Carter. "You remember Mr. Paladin, Jared. Isn't it a nice coincidence that he is taking the same boat I am?"

From Carter's looks it was not a happy coincidence. "You're stopping in Sacramento, Paladin?" he asked coldly.

"No, I'm going on, but I'll try to look after Miss Johansen that far."

"I don't approve of this trip, Inga," Carter said severely. "You meet all kinds of scum on these river boats. I'm sure neither your father nor Arthur would like it."

"How will they know about it if you don't tell them?" she questioned.

"Arthur expects me to report everything you do," Carter said primly, and Paladin made a mental note.

When they got on board Rod Jefferson promptly disappeared, and Paladin and Inga stayed on deck for an hour watching the shore glide slowly by. Then Inga excused herself to go to her cabin.

Paladin knew there would be a card game going on somewhere and went in search of it. He was not long finding it, nor much surprised to see young Jefferson with a stack of chips in front of him. But he was astonished to see Norge at the same table.

"Your young friend never seems to learn, Paladin," Norge said.

There was a piece of paper lying beside Norge's chips, and Paladin turned it face side up. Its value was two hundred dollars, and it bore the signature of Roderick Jefferson. "My luck will turn," Rod said.

"It has already," Paladin answered. "I'll just buy this, Norge."

"I don't know as—"

"Two hundred dollars, Norge," Paladin said grimly, and counted out the money. Laying a hand far from gently on Rod's shoulder he said, "You go catch yourself a fish. If I catch you playing poker with this crook Norge again I'll break your neck."

"Nobody can call me a crook," Norge said belligerently.

"You want to make a donation to charity, Norge?"

Norge hesitated, his features distorted by the seething fury he dared not translate into action. He had a reputation as a bully and the men were watching him, but it was better to lose face than to be dead. "I've had enough of you," he said as he pushed back his chair.

"The boat is putting into shore, Norge. I recommend that you leave it there," Paladin said, and dropped into Jefferson's vacated chair. He held some good hands, but nobody would bet high against him, and when he reached Sacramento he was only about a hundred dollars ahead. But Norge was not on the boat.

Rod was waiting with a half-sulky, half-ashamed look on his face but he brightened when Inga took notice of him. She had changed to a gray traveling dress, sturdy shoes and a man's hat, but she had lost none of her feminine charm.

"So you are the young man who is going to work for my father," she said, offering her hand.

"He'd better work or I'll take a two-hundred-dollar IOU out of his hide," Paladin said.

"I'm burning with ambition," Rod said.

"You'll burn with something else if I ever catch you in a poker game again," Paladin warned him jokingly.

They went to a hotel, and instead of the one small bag Carter had brought Inga now had two more heavy suitcases.

"You are a deceitful woman," Paladin said. "I'm sure Mr. Carter thought he was carrying all your luggage."

" 'Mistrust no man without cause; neither be you credulous without proof,' " she quoted.

"Now we're back to Euphues who also said, 'Cast not your eyes on the beauty of women, lest ye cast away your heart with folly,' " he retorted.

"You baffle me, Paladin. Do you suffer from heartbreak?"

"Not unless it's in the process," he said, and her creamy complexion reddened. It was the first time he had seen her betray anything except perfect calm.

They took the train to Winnemucca, a town just then enjoying a mining boom, and Paladin bought three stage tickets to Boise. When they appeared at the stage station next morning they were told that the stage line had temporarily suspended operations because of an Indian scare.

"Either go back or go on to Salt Lake, and then double back to Boise," they were advised.

Paladin watched to see how Inga accepted the bad news. It was time for the heiress to throw a tantrum if she was ever going to, but her Norse calm remained unruffled.

She said, "Being a Norsky I should have stuck to the water, just as my father should have done. If we have to go on to the point of a triangle and then double back it will take us twice as long. Don't you suppose you could buy horses and a pack outfit?"

"I might. It would be hard going, and there would still be the Indians."

"They're only Piutes, and I'd take a chance on getting scalped in order to get through. What was it you were quoting from Bacon about death back there on the train?"

" 'Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so in the other . . . It is as natural to die as to be born; and to a little infant, perhaps, the one

is as painful as the other.’ ”

“There is your answer,” she said. “Will you see what you can do?”

Paladin shrugged, and went in search of horses. He obtained four; three to be ridden, and the fourth to carry supplies and a small tent for Inga. She paid the bills without question.

Rod Jefferson was somewhat less amenable. “You mean you expect me to ride one of these animals for three days? he exclaimed in horror.

“It may be longer than that, and again it may be much shorter if we encounter Indians.”

“I think I’ll take the long way, by stage.”

“No, Roderick,” Paladin said, “it would not be seemly for Miss Johansen and I not to have a chaperon. You’ll serve, or you’ll square up those IOU’s right now.”

“You—you blackmailer,” Rod charged.

“If you get through I think you’ll be a man, my son. I think you had better lengthen those stirrups,” Paladin said implacably.

Inga had repudiated the idea of a sidesaddle, and when she was ready to mount she was dressed in man’s clothes. With her supple height she could be mistaken for a man at a short distance, and she handled her horse well.

The country was straight desert, a wide valley between two mountain ranges, but it became more mountainous as they proceeded. Inga voiced no complaints, but Rod Jefferson, who had seldom been on a horse before, protested more and more vociferously with every mile.

“Instead of groaning so much, you just keep your eyes peeled for smoke signals,” Paladin told him.

“If I see any Indians I’ll join the tribe,” Rod declared. “To hell with civilization.”

They had not reached the danger zone when they camped that night. The next day they were deep into the mountains, and just before sundown Paladin caught sight of two Indians scurrying for cover on a ridge top. He didn’t mention it to his companions, but if the Indians were hostile they would soon know about it.

He urged the others to hurry on the pretext that they must find water before dark, and luckily they did come upon a small spring flowing from a clump of chokeberries on a hillside. Paladin took charge of the horses, telling Rod to help Inga set up her tent. He got surprised looks from them both, and snapped, “Do you expect me to do all the work, just because I did it last night?”

Rod had never put up a tent in his life, but he began to paw at the

canvas until Inga told him what to do. When Paladin returned the tent was up.

Paladin had found good grass for the horses below the spring, and staked the animals. He carried an armload of wood back to the camp.

"Is it safe to build a fire?" Inga asked.

"No. And it's just as unsafe not to build one. The Indians know where we are, and I'd rather die on a full stomach—and I always did hate cold food."

"What makes you think the Indians—"

"I saw two of them an hour ago. We can't hide, and we can't outrun them so our only chance is to outtalk 'em."

Paladin built the fire and cooked their supper of pork and beans and coffee. "Did you really see Indians?" Rod demanded.

"Any well chosen lie is more palatable than the truth. Believe what you like."

"I really don't like the idea of being scalped in my bed," Inga said. She was frightened, but trying hard not to show it. "Couldn't we just move on?"

"Our horses are too tired. The Bible says, 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth.' If we flee they will think we are wicked."

"I suppose it was foolish to come this way."

"From what I heard this is only a small war party," Paladin said. "Some starving Indians killed a settler's cow, so the settlers gathered and hanged several of them whether they were the guilty ones or not. So they killed some white men. The chances are they are clear out of the country, and the ones I saw belong to a party of old men, women and children."

"But we should stand guard, shouldn't we?"

"I'm going to. You two are tireder than I am. Get what rest you can. They won't attack us in the night, though they may try to steal our horses. If you hear a shot stay where you are. We should be out of the Indian country tomorrow."

After Inga retired to her tent and Rod had made his bed close to the entrance, Paladin walked up the ridge opposite the small stream where he could see both the tent and horses. He was tough-fibered, but he was tired and found it hard to keep awake. He dared not close his eyes, and from time to time went down to inspect the horses. If any Indian approached them the alien smell would make them uneasy. His best bet was to watch them rather than look for Indians. Once or twice his suspicions were aroused, but nothing happened and at the first flush of dawn he led the horses back to camp.

Rod sprang from his blankets, calling out, "Paladin?"

“Start a fire. We’ll be moving out right after we have breakfast.”

“I meant to change you off, but I never woke up once after I got to sleep,” Rod apologized.

Inga came out of her tent as Paladin was cooking breakfast. She didn’t look as if she had slept well. “There were no Indians then,” she said.

“Maybe not, but I have the feeling that we may be surrounded by them. We’ll act as if they were not here anyway.”

They had just filled their plates when the largest Indian Paladin had ever seen materialized before them. Indeed, he had never seen a bigger man. The Indian must have been nearly seven feet tall, and was broad in proportion, with a large, handsome head. He was bare to the waist and was beautifully built. The astonishing thing about him was that his black hair was cut short. His buckskin pants were fastened up by a belt, and there were moccasins on his feet—feet so large that they were out of proportion with the rest of his huge body. He carried a rifle in his hand and somehow it looked like a toy.

Paladin’s hand rested on his gun, but he had the strange feeling that shooting a bullet into that brown chest would be like shooting into a pine tree. Like finding the animals in a scrambled puzzle, Paladin saw various black eyes staring at him from under tangled masses of black hair.

The big Indian said: “I am Nampuh. In Shoshoni that means Bigfoot, which is what you whites call me. If the Indians knew the lore of your literature they would call me Robin Hood. I take from the whites and give to the Indians.”

“I frankly wasn’t expecting to find an educated Indian in the wilderness,” Paladin said.

“Don’t let my speech fool you. I am a barbarian at heart, and behind me are twenty savages. I disdain your so-called civilization, but education is at times a useful weapon.”

“What do you want of us?”

“I see the image of a knight embossed on your holster, which is shaped for a fast, easy draw. I have heard of professional gunmen, but you are a little late. Idaho formerly paid a bounty for Indian scalps, so we try to collect a white scalp for every red one taken until we even the score.” A faint, sardonic smile curved Bigfoot’s lips.

Inga and Rod stood close to Paladin, their eyes wide with unbelief.

Paladin said: “We have killed no Indians and don’t want to. We are only passing through the country.”

Bigfoot said: “Since unfortunately the Indians are not wealthy enough to pay a bounty, but the white prospectors still consider

Indians to be fair game, I collect in my own way. When a white man kills an Indian I kill a white man. When white men rape and abuse Indian women I turn the white women I capture over to my men. So far the score is about even.”

Now for the first time Bigfoot seemed to take notice of Inga. Paladin could hear her agitated breathing beside him.

Paladin said: “I can tell you one thing: you are not going to give Miss Johansen to anyone. I can put a bullet into you before you can raise that rifle, and she has a derringer in her hand which she’ll use to blow out her own brains if you or any other Indian approaches her.”

“When it comes down to cases you white people always weaken,” Bigfoot taunted. “You would not be the first white man to shoot me. I could give you two shots and break your neck before the lady could use her derringer.”

Paladin dared not betray the inner fear he felt. Bullet scars were plainly visible in the man’s chest. It was certain that he would be hard to stop.

Bigfoot went on, “In these hills I can outrun any horse. In college I set a world’s record for the broad jump, and I was never defeated in the twenty-six-mile marathon.”

“You, sir, are a braggart,” Paladin said.

Bigfoot laughed. “But I always make good my boasts.”

Inga spoke up clearly. “If you are a college man what are you doing out here with savages?”

“Living up to my reputation as a Robin Hood, my blonde goddess. Now that I think of it, you are the first woman I have seen since—who would make a worthy mate for me. Suppose we make a deal. You come with me, and I’ll let your friends go free. I would treat you well.”

“No deal,” Paladin said huskily.

“Be quiet. You are only an incidental.”

Inga said, “You said I was the only woman since—since whom?”

“Since a white woman who loved me was persuaded by her friends to spit on me because I am of mixed blood: Caucasian, Indian and Negro. Had it not been for that I would have remained George Willoughby.* Now I am what you term a renegade.”

* (Bigfoot is a legend in Idaho. The city of Nampa was named after him. His real name was Willoughby, and he was an educated man. He could outrun any horse in a rough country, but he was finally killed by a white man. His band of renegades was from many tribes.)

The man must be kept talking, and Paladin said, “Have you ever read Milton’s *Paradise Lost*?”

“I have browsed through it.”

“And like Satan you believe it is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.”

Bigfoot proved his erudition by quoting, “Here we may reign secure; and in my choice, to reign is worth ambition, though in hell.”

Paladin realized that threats against this man would be futile. He said: “You are a gentleman, and you know a lady when you see one. Miss Johansen would find a way to kill herself if she couldn’t kill you. You couldn’t act the gentleman among savages, and you would get no more satisfaction than you could in trampling that cactus lily under your feet.”

“I wonder about that,” Bigfoot said with his enigmatic smile. “Sometimes I visit a white town—that is why I keep my hair cut short. In my citizen’s clothes no one ever takes me for an Indian. I might even want to become civilized again.”

Inga said, “You could find another woman. My father is a wealthy man, and you know the value of money.”

“On that promise you think I would let you go? I am not a fool, Miss Johansen.”

“I will be your hostage,” Paladin offered. “If the money is not forthcoming your men can have their Roman holiday.”

“Why should I keep only one when I have three? Besides, I have seen enough of your civilization, and money means nothing to my people. If I took your money I would become a bandit, not an avenger. Will you fight me for your blonde goddess?”

“I’ll fight you; my revolver against your rifle.”

“No. If we fight we fight like men; unarmed and stripped to the waist.”

“So be it,” Paladin said. He would be outweighed more than a hundred pounds. No gambler would have taken odds of a hundred to one on him, and he could win only through sheer luck; but it was the only chance in sight.

Bigfoot called out in Shoshoni and a dozen or more Indians came out of the brush. They made Bigfoot look like a giant surrounded by pygmies.

Paladin said, “Before this ball starts I want your word that if I win we be allowed to go in safety.”

“It is given. In only one way, perhaps, is the Indian superior to the white man, and that is in his integrity. An Indian keeps his word.”

“You can’t beat him,” Inga whispered. “Why torture yourself?” Her hand was in her pocket nestling the derringer he had given her.

“If I lose, use that gun quick—on yourself,” he said.

Paladin lowered his head and charged, hoping to butt the man in

the stomach, but Bigfoot was not there. He bounded aside with the speed and grace of a ballet dancer, and Paladin landed on his hands and knees, bruising his knuckles on the rocks.

“A good try, Paladin,” Bigfoot laughed. Then he leaped. Instead of trying to dodge, Paladin stepped in and drove one fist after the other to the Indian’s stomach. It gave no more than leather stretched over a barrel. Then Bigfoot caught him on the side of the head with a bearlike sweep and Paladin was knocked end over end. His head rang but he concentrated every effort on keeping his senses. He knew that he could never whip the man. His only chance was to trick him.

Bigfoot paused to look at him triumphantly, then rushed for the kill. Swiftly and unexpectedly Paladin locked both feet around one of Bigfoot’s ankles, tripping him. Bigfoot fell on his hands and knees, and when they both got to their feet Paladin held a ten-pound rock in both hands. Bigfoot instinctively raised his hands to protect his face and Paladin slammed the rock down on one of the huge feet with all the power in his body.

It was a punishing, crippling blow and Bigfoot went down on his knees. Paladin followed up with a series of hard, deliberate blows to the face before Bigfoot could get to his feet again. Bigfoot tried to catch him, but his crippled foot handicapped him and Paladin danced away. Both men stopped.

Paladin said, “Your advantage has been cut in half.”

“Do you still think you can beat me?” Bigfoot asked.

“Frankly, no. But I’ll get a lunch while you’re getting a meal.”

“You’ve done well enough. Get on your horses and go before I change my mind,” Bigfoot said surprisingly. “I admire courage, and I think your blonde goddess would do exactly what you said she would.”

Inga said, “My Viking ancestors used to raid helpless people and ravish their women. I wouldn’t like to be ravished, and I would kill you or myself if I could. But if it’s any satisfaction to you I would rather be ravished by you than any man I have ever seen.”

Bigfoot smiled appreciatively through the grimace of pain on his face. “You would be a worthy experiment, Miss Johansen,” he said. “Worth any man risking his life for.”

He lectured his men in their native tongue until they subsided, and one of them brought up a horse. Bigfoot vaulted easily onto its back then turned to look at the white people.

“Next time I will not be so lenient,” he warned, then gave a whoop and galloped away with his men behind him.

CHAPTER 7

The encounter with Bigfoot had shaken them all. Inga said, "We owe our lives to you, Paladin. It was really heroic of you to take such a chance."

"I assure you I had no thought of being a hero. It was the only chance we had, and I was lucky. I hope we've seen the last of our red Robin Hood."

"He was certainly no Little Red Riding Hood," Rod said.

"At that he is a remarkable man," Inga said. "Some woman must have hurt him deeply."

"Myself, I think he is more of a Hamlet than a Robin Hood," Paladin said.

"Or maybe he is more like Macbeth," Inga said, " 'I have supped full with horrors; direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, cannot once start me.' "

"Well, he sure as the devil startled me," Rod contributed.

"I hope we don't see him again," Inga said. "Next time I might decide to let him carry me away. But I think the danger is over, so let's enjoy ourselves."

"If this kind of enjoyment is what it takes to get me a job I prefer to remain a bum," Rod said wearily.

"You have obvious ambitions in that direction, my friend," Paladin answered.

They made a night camp without incident, and the next day reached a ferry on Snake River. The ferryman said that the Boise-Walla Walla stage would cross the ferry at nine the next morning, and that they could wait there until it came along.

"By our map I think we might make better time if we headed straight north as we are going," Paladin remarked.

"You mean keep on on horseback when we could just as well take the stage?" Rod demanded. "Not for me. I've already worn blisters on my feet from standing up in the stirrups."

"I agree with Rod," Inga said. "We'll take the stage."

"Tenderfeet!"

"You don't know your anatomy, friend," Rod said.

"You mean to say you came through from Winnemucca?" the ferryman asked. "Didn't they tell you the Piutes were on a rampage? You might even have fallen in with old Bigfoot, and you'd all have

been scalped.”

“You mean George Willoughby, don’t you?” Paladin queried.

“Willoughby? Never heard of him.”

“But I have talked with a Mr. Willoughby, who claims he is frequently called Bigfoot by the whites, and Nampuh by the Indians.”

“You—you talked with Bigfoot—and lived to tell about it,” the man spluttered.

“We’re here, aren’t we?”

“I’ve heard that he’s a halfbreed, and that sometimes he goes into settlements like a white man. The legislature has offered a hundred-dollar bounty for him, but it ought to be a thousand. I still don’t see how he ever let you go, especially a good-lookin’ white woman,” the puzzled ferryman said.

Inga said, “I can’t see that he is any more of a savage than people who pay a bounty on other people’s lives.”

“Lady, I’ve seen the ruins of wagon trains that monster raided, and I’ve seen the people he killed—women and children. You should have killed him if you got close enough to talk to him.”

“Looks like we were lucky enough that he didn’t kill us,” Paladin said.

They found a shady place to camp and bought a few supplies from the ferryman. He disclaimed any need for horses, but agreed to sell the animals on commission and forward the money to the address Inga gave him. They anticipated that most of it would go for commission.

“It doesn’t matter so long as we get where we are going,” Inga said.

“Trouble with most of us is we don’t know where we’re going, except Rod, and he is in no hurry to get there,” Paladin said dryly.

There was just room on the stage for them. It was a handsome Concord drawn by six horses, but the road was rough and bumpy and the stage careened wildly from side to side. Paladin sat with the driver by request, and wondered how long it would be before his two companions got stage-sick.

“There’s an Injun scare in the country, and you look like a man who won’t panic, so I’d like to have you help keep a lookout,” the driver had said.

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled,” Paladin had promised.

The horses were changed every twenty miles, and a new driver took over when they reached the Grand Ronde Valley. From then on there was no more talk of Indians, and Paladin joined his battered and disheveled companions inside the stage. They crossed the Blue Mountains that night, and Inga fell asleep with her head on Paladin’s

shoulder.

She didn't awaken completely until they were in sight of Walla Walla the next morning. She straightened with a start and gave him a wholly suspicious look.

He said, "I took no liberties. Of course, had we been alone in the stage—"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to glare. For a minute I didn't realize where we are. I must look a fright."

"Somewhat," he admitted. Her clothing was rumpled, and dust had settled over her until her golden hair looked gray. "Look at Jefferson there as if in a mirror."

Rod was a physical wreck. The long horseback ride had been a painful ordeal, and he had been unable to sleep in the jouncing stage. Inga had slept only because Paladin had held her close. Rod's eyes were bloodshot, and his lips were sore and swollen. Unconsciously he had kept running his tongue over his lips so that there was a great white patch around his mouth.

She said, "Heavens, if I look like that—poor Rod."

"We could all do with a little soap and water," Paladin said. He had stood it better than the others, but he was bone tired. The others had sunburned, and the skin was peeling from their faces, but his skin was tough.

Inga rearranged her clothing as best she could, and tried to sit upright in a dignified manner, though occasionally the stage struck a chuckhole and threw her into Paladin's arms.

They pulled into the stage station at last and Paladin stepped down and gave Inga a hand. Rod stumbled after them and immediately disappeared inside the station, while Paladin escorted Inga to a hotel.

"Will you look around and see about transportation," she said. "The main road runs north of the river, but I want to avoid that, and the stage. See if you can buy a two-seated buggy and as many horses as we'll need, but close no deals until I talk with them. I'm on familiar ground now."

He nodded one-sidedly. It was her party, and he was expected to play courier to an heiress. After seeing her up to her room he washed up, shaved and changed shirts; then went down to get breakfast.

Walla Walla was a bustling little town in a beautiful valley, and already had a history dating from the fur trade, and it was an important link in the growing emigration to Oregon. Now it was a taking-off place to the gold fields of Idaho, and the new and flourishing lumber business.

A little inquiry confirmed that though there were plenty of horses

for sale or hire, not a single rig could be had. Since Inga had vetoed the stage the alternative was to buy more saddle horses and a pack outfit. He soon found where he could buy five good horses, but didn't close the deal. That would be Inga's problem.

The man asked him curiously where he was going. It was none of his business, but he seemed familiar with roads and trails, and Paladin told him he was heading for the Potlatch.

"With five horses you must have quite a party," the man commented.

"Just me and a young partner. We figure to do a little prospecting."

"Then likely you're heading for Montana or the Boise Basin, and you'll need a guide. I can get you a real good one."

"No, thanks."

"Well, if you want to save time you'll keep on the south side of the river as far as Lewiston. I'd advise you to stop over at Ned Howard's ranch on Alpowa Creek for he can show you a shortcut to the Potlatch."

"I haven't bought your horses yet, but if I do I may look this Howard up," Paladin said carelessly.

Inga had recuperated marvelously when he saw her again. She had got a few hours sleep, and changed into a clean, fresh dress.

"You look like the rose of Sharon, Madam," he complimented her.

"I feel like a lumberjack after a Saturday night spree. Did you have any luck?"

He told her about the horses, and she didn't seem disturbed about undertaking another horseback trip. "I suppose you'll want to take a look at them."

She gave him a surprised look. "You should be a better judge than I. If you think they'll do I'll give you the money to pay for them."

He mentioned the figure, and added enough to buy supplies for a short trip. It was obvious by now that money didn't mean a thing to her. He was privately relieved that the horse trader wouldn't see her.

"Don't bother about a tent this time," she said. "I'm used to sleeping out."

He said, with lifted eyebrows, "You must be getting used to me." All that got him was a frown. He suggested waiting until morning, but there would be a few hours of daylight left and she wanted to get under way at once.

"I'll have the horses at the hotel within the hour," he agreed.

He made another short search for Rod and didn't find him, then closed the deal for the five horses. There was a bay gelding he

particularly liked and he paid for it with his own money. He had a couple more horses than they really needed, but Inga didn't notice, though she asked about Rod. He had to tell her that Rod had deserted.

"But there aren't any Indians up here except Nez Percés, and they are friendly."

"But there'll be some hard riding and some hard work that's more terrifying to our friend Jefferson. But he may decide to take the stage."

"I hope so."

He gave her back part of the money, explaining that he had paid for the bay himself. "You didn't need to buy him," she said.

"I might need a good warhorse," he smiled. "I've named him Bucephalus."

"The horse is all right, but I doubt that you're another Alexander the Great."

"Touché! But, quien sabe?"

He had divided the light pack between two of the horses, and let the fifth, a gentle little buckskin pony he had selected for Rod, follow behind.

Inga had changed again into her riding outfit. They didn't get far that evening and made camp along a small stream. Paladin tended the horses, and when he returned Inga had built a fire and had supper started. He sat down on a bedroll and watched her finish it. It pleased him that she wasn't going to act the grand mistress.

After they had eaten he made out their beds, carrying his own some fifty feet distant. Inga called, "Either my feet are swollen or my boots are too tight. Help me get them off."

After an unsuccessful attempt he turned his back on her and picked up one of her feet. "Put the other foot against my *derrière* and shove," he directed.

After some maneuvering both boots were removed and Paladin said, "Better let me massage those feet."

"That feels much better," she said presently. "I'm getting you quite domesticated, aren't I, Paladin?"

"Since Seraphim cannot abide here, it behooves all women to give thanks for decently amiable men."

"I render thanks," she mocked.

Paladin was up at daybreak and took a look at the horses. Then he took a look at Inga. She was still sleeping, one arm under her head, and she looked remarkably young and innocent. He built the fire and

had the coffeepot boiling and the bacon sizzling when she woke up.

"My, that smells good," she said.

"How are the boots?"

"I won the struggle." She disappeared for a few minutes to wash her face and hands in the clear, cold creek. When she returned her long golden braids hung down to her waist. "I'm going to leave my hair this way," she announced.

"That suits me fine," he said.

She cleaned up the camp and packed the tin dishes while he saddled up and they were soon on their way.

They were soon in prairie country that had long been pasture land for the Cayuse and Nez Percé Indians. They crossed numerous deeply worn trails leading down to water, but there was one deeper than the others which crossed them and led steadily to the northeast.

They paused for an hour to rest the horses and eat their lunch, and Inga talked more about her father than she had done before. Paladin learned that her mother was dead, and Eric had been too busy making a fortune to bother much about his daughter, though they were fond of each other.

"Little men have always pecked at Eric, but he pays them no more mind than a lordly cock in a barnyard would to a flock of bantams. But little men are sometimes treacherous," she said.

"I should think you being out here would worry him more than anything else."

"It does. But I want to be where I can look out for him."

"When you are married to this—Norton, did you say?—he should be able to take over the business and let your father retire."

"That's just the trouble. My father will never retire as long as he can swing an axe. The expression is his."

Paladin was wishing that he had bought a tent anyway when the heavy black stormclouds began to pile up in the west late in the afternoon. He said: "The man I bought the horses from said there was a rancher on Alpowa Creek who would take us in. I hope we make it before the storm hits."

"I hope it isn't a shebang," she said.

"A—shebang?"

"An outlaw hangout. There are a number of them in the country. The ranches are really owned by horse thieves and are called shebangs. Most of the thieves were hanged years ago, so I doubt if there is any danger now," she explained.

"We've got some good-looking horses, and I wouldn't like to lose

Bucephalus,” he jibed.

“And I wouldn’t like to be rained on all night,” she retorted. “Let’s hurry.”

They crossed a low ridge just as the first drops of rain began to spatter them and saw a cluster of log buildings and pole corrals at the edge of a meadow below them. They rode toward it agallop and the rain started coming down in sheets when they were fifty feet from the door of the largest cabin. Three men and a woman were standing out on a narrow roofed porch. They reined in far enough to the side as not to splash mud on the porch, then swung down and dashed for shelter.

Paladin had taken time to size up their prospective hosts. One was a sloppy-looking man of fifty with a walrus mustache and a paunch. The other men were much younger. They were bearded and each man wore a brace of revolvers. He had seen the likes of them with Quantrill. The woman was about thirty, and far from matronly. Her soiled red dress would have been more in place in a cheap saloon than on a horse ranch.

“Well, make yourselves at home,” the older man said.

“Would you happen to be Ned Howard?”

“Yeah, I’m Howard,” the fat man said. “You lookin for me?”

“Not exactly. I bought some horses from a man at the Lucky Strike livery stable in Walla Walla, and he told me we might get put up for the night here.”

“I reckon you might. Beds are a dollar, meals fifty cents and pasture two bits per horse.”

“I think we can pay it,” Paladin said, and handed the man a five-dollar gold piece and a silver quarter. “Two rooms, supper and breakfast and pasture for five horses,” he enumerated.

“Eli’ll show you where to put your gear,” Howard said. “Dolly, show the lady in, and cook a little something special for supper.”

The one called Eli slipped on a slicker and motioned Paladin to follow him. The other young man joined them, while Howard followed the two women into the house. Eli showed Paladin a shed in which to store his outfit, and said, “Seems to me I’ve seen that bay before. Where’d you steal him?”

The remark was intended to be funny, but it didn’t strike a responsive chord with Paladin. He didn’t believe much in premonitions, but he had a hunch that there would be trouble here.

He said, “Since you fellows probably never rode a horse in your life that was honestly come by you may find this hard to believe, but I bought him, and I’ve got a bill of sale.”

“You’re not the friendliest cuss in the world, are you?”

“No.”

There was a chance the horses wouldn't be there in the morning, but Paladin couldn't hide them in his vest pocket. He went to the house, and Howard called him into the kitchen. Howard and Inga were seated at the table talking while Dolly was sulkily burning beefsteak.

“Set right down, Mr. Paladin,” Howard said. “Supper'll be ready in a jiff.”

“You said hot biscuits, and you'll have to wait for 'em,” Dolly announced.

Howard turned to bark at her, “You're burnin' the meat.”

Inga gave Paladin a wry, half-apologetic look. It was raining hard and a few trickles were coming through the dirt roof, forming muddy little puddles before Dolly got around to placing pans to catch the drip.

The sad and unsavory meal was ready at last, and the other two men came in and sat at the end of the table without troubling to remove their hats. Dolly placed platters of burned steak and fried potatoes on the table, and poured coffee into large granite cups. Howard heaped his own plate with food and passed the platters along to Inga. They went from hand to hand to the men at the end of the table.

“So your name is Johansen,” Howard said with his mouth full. “Any relation to the Potlatch lumber king?”

“I'm his daughter,” Inga said, with the idea of impressing the man that it would be unwise not to be respectful.

“Well, I do declare. We got quality company. You conduct yourself like a lady, Dolly.”

“Don't I always?” Dolly slurred.

There was squabbling back and forth until Inga said: “I think I'll retire. It's been a hard day.”

Paladin arose with her, but Howard forestalled his inquiry as to where he was to sleep. “Eli, you and Pete will have to sleep in the barn and let Mr. Paladin have your room.”

“Why should he have my bed?” the man called Pete bristled.

“Because I say so,” Howard roared. “An' if I ketch you monkeyin' around Dolly again you'll be runnin'; without any legs.”

“You can't scare me, and you don't own Dolly,” Pete stated defiantly.

Paladin shrugged and accompanied Inga to the door of her room. “Is that woman a—a—” she whispered.

“A prostitute? Who knows? Virtue often stubs its toe on the jagged rocks of poverty. Judged by appearance our traveling alone out here wouldn’t seem exactly conventional.”

“I’m not concerned with her morals,” Inga said angrily. “I just don’t want those men making a mistake about my door.”

“They won’t,” he grinned.

Paladin looked around with distaste at the foul-smelling room that had been assigned him, and he doubted that Inga’s room was much better. He thought he understood the setup here. Dolly was a fading woman of the underworld whom Howard had brought up here to be his woman, and he was having trouble maintaining his monopoly. He wasn’t much worried that they would bother Inga; it was the horses that were in danger.

He sat on the bed awhile, then blew out the kerosene lamp without getting undressed. The rain was coming down steadily. He waited until everything was quiet in the house, then stepped outside and ran toward the open shed where he had left the saddles, from where he could watch the barn where Eli and Pete were supposed to sleep.

He had waited ten minutes when the men led two saddled horses out of the barn. Because of the rain and the dark they didn’t see him until he reached the corner of the barn.

“Wet night for a ride, isn’t it?” he asked.

They whirled toward him and he could sense rather than see them go for their guns. “Don’t do it,” he warned. “One of you is sure to wind up dead, and you can’t know which one of you it’ll be.”

“We were just goin’ out to take a look at the horses,” Eli said.

“I know—my horses. Step down slow and easy and back up against the building. I’d rather kill you than see you get wet.”

They dismounted slowly and backed against the barn. Had they not been shrouded by their slickers they might have made gunplay, but it was too much of a disadvantage.

“Open your slickers, unbuckle your gun belts and let them drop. You first, Eli,” Paladin ordered.

“You’re making a mistake, Mister,” the fellow said.

“Not so bad as you’ll make if you trifle with me,” Paladin said, and the guns dropped into the soggy mud. He made them turn one horse loose, then forced the men to walk ahead of him while he led the other animal into the shed. He made Eli tie Pete to a supporting pole of the shed, then forced him to back up to the other side of the pole, and in a minute had both men safely tethered to the post.

“At least you’ll be dry in here,” he told them. He unrolled his own bed and was presently asleep.

It had stopped raining by daybreak, and after gagging both cursing men with their own neckerchiefs he rode out on the meadow and drove in his own horses. He had just got them in the corral when Howard lumbered out without noticing the men in the shed.

"You must be in a hurry, Paladin. I didn't hear you get up," he said.

"I always like to get an early start. Go wake up your woman and have her cook breakfast." Paladin walked back with the man, and this time Howard got a look at his two chilled and gurgling hired men. He looked at them, and then at Paladin, and blurted, "What's goin' on here?"

"It's quite simple. They were going to run off my horses—on your orders I suspect. What I paid you for doesn't include conversation, so let's have very little of it. You can turn them loose after we leave."

Howard was smart enough to see that the situation had got woefully out of hand from his viewpoint. He led the way to the house, flung open a door and yelled, "Dolly, git out here."

Dolly came out soon, looking more frowsy and sullen than she had the evening before. "If these people are in such a hell of a hurry let 'em get their own breakfast," she said.

"That'll be a pleasure, Dolly," Paladin said. "Now you just sit down and keep Mr. Howard company."

The woman became aware that something was wrong. "Where's Pete and Eli?" she demanded shrilly.

"Set down and behave yourself or you'll find yourself tied up and gagged the way they are," Howard told her.

Paladin found fresh meat, eggs and potatoes and was busy at the stove when Inga came out. "Did I miss something?" she asked suspiciously.

"Not very much. I was supposed to stay in the house and see that nobody molested you while Mr. Howard's men ran off our horses. It didn't work, so as soon as we eat we'll be on our way."

Paladin made breakfast for only the two of them, and explained what had happened while they ate, pausing only once to make Dolly resume her seat when she tried to run out. He considered the episode practically closed when he heard someone outside shout, "Paladin!"

He stepped to the door and was considerably shocked when he saw a wet and bedraggled Rod Jefferson outside with a middle-aged Nez Percé Indian. From their appearance they had been riding all night in the rain.

Paladin remarked to Inga, "Methinks yon Cassius hath a lean and hungry look."

Paladin remarked to Inga, "Methinks yon Cassius hath a being

followed by men who want to kill you and kidnap Miss Johansen.”

“Interesting. Who are the men?”

“I don’t know. I was hiding out in the livery stable till after you left, and I heard some men talking. One of them said it would be worth ten thousand dollars to kidnap Miss Johansen. I heard the stableman tell them that you wouldn’t get by a place he called Howard’s Shebang. Two of them got horses and started out to follow you. I persuaded this Indian to get a couple of horses and bring me here since he said he knew the place. We rode all night, and he kept me from blundering into those men’s camp.”

“I thought you had decided to quit us?”

“I had, but I couldn’t have lived with my conscience if I hadn’t tried to warn you.”

“ ‘O faithful conscience, delicately pure, how doth a little failing wound thee sore.’ You just remember that conscience, and that every wound makes it a little less delicate.”

Paladin returned to the house, and said: “Get some breakfast for my friends will you, Dolly? And while you’re about it you had better cook something for yourselves. Pete and Eli will be ready to eat after I turn them loose.” The woman gave him a frightened look and hurried about her duties.

Rod and the Indian came in to eat, and Paladin gave the Indian fifty dollars which Rod had promised him.

“How could anybody have known I’d be here?” Inga asked.

“Somebody probably sent a wire from San Francisco to expect you,” Paladin said.

She said, “Only Jared Carter would have been watching me, and he would have wired my father or Arthur Norton.”

“Come to think of it,” Rod said, “one of them said Arthur Norton would pay the ten thousand dollars.”

“So that’s it. They figured Arthur would pay more ransom than my father would, and perhaps they’re right,” she said.

“Unless Norton was the kidnaper,” Paladin said.

“Arthur is my fiancé. How ridiculous can you be?”

“Well, I think we’ve got about eight hours start on them, maybe ten; so we had better be making time,” Paladin said.

The extra horse could still be used, and Paladin confiscated a saddle for Rod. As they rode away they saw Howard rush out to the shed to release his men, but Paladin had seen to it that they were left on foot. As they rode over a hill they saw Howard shaking his fist at them.

CHAPTER 8

Paladin kept his companions riding hard, with no complaint from Inga, but plenty from Rod. If Inga was worth ten thousand dollars—and she might be worth more—there would surely be five men following them, and three of them bent on revenge.

They were in timber country, and they rode deep into it for their first night's camp. The next day they struck the Clearwater and Paladin caught sight of the five men following them. He was sure that he hadn't been seen, and since it was evening he returned to his friends, and they made camp under a bluff. If he figured right Howard and his men would pass close by and get ahead of them. Several large rafts loaded with lumber floated by in mid-stream.

"From my father's mill," Inga explained. "They raft the lumber down to Lewiston, where it is taken on steamboats for transportation to the coast."

Paladin routed them out early next morning and told them they were swimming the river before breakfast.

"Did you see anything?" Inga inquired.

"Instinct is the nose of the mind. Mine tells me to get across this river."

It would be a long, hard swim for the horses, but only Bucephalus would carry a heavy load. The only real danger was drifting logs, but they dodged them without incident and climbed out on the opposite bank.

Later in the day they saw the five men on the other side of the river, but there was no indication that they had been seen, and Howard and his men seemed to have no inclination to cross the river.

In time they came to the Potlatch. It was nearly dark but Inga assured Paladin that her father's sawmill was only about ten miles upstream, and that she knew the way through the heavy timber, and she wanted to go on.

"Very well," Paladin said. "Women have always been good at leading men into darkness."

"You are a philosopher, Paladin, and someone said that a philosopher is a man who is happy only when other people are miserable, and miserable when others are happy."

"I can bear it, and I'm anxious to meet your father."

They plodded along a logging road, and at last they saw the moon

shining on acres of freshly sawed lumber, and huge piles of yellow pine logs. Paladin got an idea of the magnitude of Eric Johansen's operations.

Above the millpond was a cluster of board-and-slab shacks that housed the crew, and Inga led the way expertly between the tall ricks of lumber until they came to a large, unpainted house among the pines at the foot of a hill.

"Here we are," she said, and Paladin didn't miss the nervous tremor in her voice.

" 'This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,' " he contributed.

"And an irate father whose bellow will make you forget all about the murmuring of the pines," she smiled faintly. "He'll want to pack me off to San Francisco by the next boat."

A big, lazy-looking dog came roaring out at them, but quieted instantly when Inga said, "Boris, don't you know me?" The big mastiff reared up, its front paws reaching to the withers of her horse.

Paladin had the feeling that it would be safer to face the five men who had been following them than the master of this big house.

"Who's out there?" a voice louder than the bellow of a bull roared out, and Paladin saw a huge man in a gray flannel nightshirt on the porch.

"It's I, Father," Inga called.

"Inga! What the devil are you doing here?" the big man demanded, with no hint of pleasure or welcome in his voice. He stalked out toward them, the bottom of his nightshirt flapping around his bulging calves. "Who are these men?"

Inga slid off her horse and kissed him, though he stood as immovable as one of his pine trees. She said, "Eric, this is Mr. Paladin who came along as my bodyguard, and his friend Rod Jefferson."

"Humph!" Johansen acknowledged the introduction. "Well, get off your horses."

"I like to feel sure of my welcome," Paladin said.

"We'll see how welcome you are after I talk with my daughter, but you can unsaddle down by the barn and turn your horses on the hill. Then come oop to the house." Like his daughter, he had a faintly perceptible accent.

"He ain't rollin' out no red carpet, even for her," Rod remarked.

"I hardly expected him to, at least not in the middle of the night," Paladin answered. He had had a mental picture of what Eric Johansen would be like, and what he had seen confirmed his impression.

They waited a reasonable time to allow Inga to explain to her father

before they returned to the house and Paladin knocked on the door.

"Well, come in," Johansen boomed impatiently. He was seated at a mahogany table on which were a whiskey decanter and several glasses. The room, in contrast with the exterior of the house, was elaborately and expensively furnished. The carpet was thick and the paintings on the walls were by artists Paladin could have named offhand. There were several fine mirrors, and the chairs and couches were deeply upholstered. In the main everything was in good taste. Rough as he was Johansen loved his luxury, though he probably also aimed to impress others with his wealth. Inga, seated on a couch at the side of the room, looked unusually small. Paladin had half expected to find her in tears, but she still looked defiant.

Johansen had drawn an old red bathrobe over his nightshirt. "Yust remember that it was my daughter that hired you, not me," he growled, "Pour yourselves a drink."

"Thanks." Paladin poured one for himself and another for Rod, who looked as if he needed it.

Inga gave Paladin an encouraging smile as she arose and said, "I'll go and help Hilda with the supper." She left as if escaping from the room, and Paladin turned to face the ruffled lion in his lair.

"Aye don't t'ank you for bringing my daughter back hyar. Aye sent her to San Francisco to get her away," Johansen said.

Paladin shrugged. "All I know is that your daughter hired me to act as her bodyguard, and promised me five thousand dollars to find out who is trying to put you out of business. Inga thinks they may be trying to kill you."

"Fool girl. And you t'ink you are better able to protect me than I can protect myself?"

"I'd hardly say that, Mr. Johansen, but your daughter does need some protection."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because somebody offered ten thousand dollars to have her kidnaped. They tried to do it, and they are watching her every move."

"I'll send her back."

"Do you have any guarantee that she'll be safe in San Francisco?" Paladin demanded, ice edging into his tone.

"She hired you to act as a bodyguard. I'll pay your salary, but if anything happens to her you vant to look out," the lumber king warned.

"Inga thinks you are the one in danger. Don't you have any enemies?"

"What do you think?"

"I'd say you make plenty of them."

"A man on his way oop has to make enemies."

Paladin noticed that the more excited the man became the more careless he was with his accent. He asked, "Do you know of anybody in particular who would profit from your demise, or failing that could put the screws on you through your daughter?"

The idea seemed to amuse Johansen. "There are people would like to put me out of business, but they know better than to try it."

"What would happen to your business if you died?" Paladin probed.

"Arthur Norton, the man Inga will marry, is a good businessman," Eric asserted.

"What about Inga? Won't she have any say about it?"

"Business is for men. She'll be my heir, but she needs a husband to manage her affairs, and Arthur Norton is the man I've picked for her," Eric said positively.

It was what Paladin had thought, and he began to feel a vague dislike for Johansen. He said coldly: "So you've got it all figured out. When you die Norton will have full control and Inga will be entirely dependent on him."

"A wife must be dependent on her husband," Eric said dogmatically.

Paladin welcomed the call to supper by Hilda, the Danish woman of whom Inga had often spoken affectionately. Eric went into the dining room with them, and Inga related their encounter with Bigfoot, but her father was not impressed. "Yust trying to scare you," he scoffed.

Paladin enjoyed the best bed he had had since leaving San Francisco, but he was up early and fairly dragged Rod out of bed. "Can't you ever let a man rest?" Rod demanded querulously.

"If you're going to get a job you've got to show Johansen that you're an early riser," Paladin said unfeelingly.

Eric seemed surprised when Rod asked for work, and it turned out much as Paladin had conjectured. Rod was offered a job in the office.

"Would you like to look around?" Inga asked Paladin.

"I'd like to."

They toured the mill first, and he noted that she had changed to more serviceable boots for clambering over the logs. Everything was bustling activity as men rode the logs in from the pond and other men with horses dragged them up on the skidways, and from there to the mill where numerous circular and band saws screamed their ear-splitting symphony. Men had to yell to make themselves heard, and above them all rode the bull voice of Eric Johansen as he rushed from place to place.

"He seems to enjoy it," Paladin remarked.

"The only thing he likes better is to be out in the timber. They never can fell trees fast enough to suit him."

In a couple of hours they had looked over the mill and the yards and Inga suggested that they take a ride through the timber. She had had Hilda prepare a lunch, and a picnic was what she seemed to have on her mind.

They rode through miles of logged-off stumps, interspersed with trees that hadn't quite made the grade. There were old skid roads everywhere where the logs had been skidded down to the river and floated on down to the mill. Here and there they encountered red-shirted rivermen riding the logs to prevent jams. Inga told Paladin that some of the logs were floated thirty or forty miles.

As soon as they were in heavy timber the whirl of the crosscut saws and the ringing of axes were constantly being interrupted by the long-drawn-out cry of, "Timber-r-r," and the crash of falling trees. It was all new to Paladin, and he listened eagerly to Inga's explanations. Plainly, she was at home in the timber, and she loved it.

Finally they took an old skid road that led back into the hills. The reason it was no longer used became apparent when they came to a great burned-over area that covered most of a mountain. Charred, naked-looking logs lay crisscrossed in impenetrable barriers, while here and there gaunt black skeletons of pine trees stood guard like dead sentinels over an abandoned battleground.

"There is nothing we dread as much as a forest fire," Inga said. "Once you hear the sound of one you never forget it. The trees are so helpless, and so are the animals caught in it. I remember this one; it was like a scene from Dante. It was hell."

"Wasn't it Dr. Faustus who said:

" 'Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self place; for where we are is hell,
And where hell is there must we ever be.' "

"Maybe we make our own hell, but the animals didn't make theirs." She led on and somehow she found a trail through the blackened ruins of the forest, over a shoulder of the mountain and down into a canyon filled with virgin pine.

She stopped at a clear cold spring and they dismounted to eat Hilda's lunch. Big, luscious thimbleberries grew sparsely around the spring and Inga insisted that they pick some for their dessert. It became a game, and she picked one he was reaching for and popped it into her mouth. Quite naturally he reached for it and their lips met. It

was a playful kiss, but she put more passion into it than he had bargained for. They went back and sat on the grass.

"Why haven't you ever married, Paladin?" she asked abruptly. "Haven't you ever found a woman you could live with?"

"Many of them. But up to now I have never met one I couldn't live without."

"Up to now?" she asked teasingly.

"Francis Bacon said: 'Wives are young men's mistresses, companions for middle age, and old men's nurses . . .' But yet he was reputed one of the wise men that made answer to the question when a man should marry: 'a young man not yet, an elder man not at all.' "

"That doesn't give a girl much to go on, does it?"

"Not if the girl is already engaged to another man."

"Engagements can be broken, Paladin." She twisted her body so that she could put her arms around his neck and pull his head down until their lips met. She was a beautiful, desirable woman and he responded to the passion of her kiss.

"Look," he said finally, "you don't even know me."

"We have been together quite a few days, and I am not unobservant."

"There would be the devil to pay if you should decide to elope with a drifter, wouldn't there?"

"I doubt that you have much fear of the devil, and I'm sure I haven't," Inga said.

Paladin began to feel himself trapped, and she had brought him here for that very purpose. He said, "If you mean what I think you mean it's the most flattering offer I've ever had, but you should give it a long think before you antagonize your father and beat yourself out of a million dollars or so."

"I hardly think he would disinherit me if I broke my engagement to Arthur."

"I suppose you know him better than I do, but I think he would."

"Then he'll just have to."

"Whoa! Back up a little," he said. "You're a grand girl and any man could be proud to win your affection. But if you are just using me as a trial horse, and I think you are, you might be making a big mistake. I might just take you seriously."

"You are far from the handsomest man I ever saw, and I doubt if you'd ever be a model husband, but you're what I want," she said frankly.

"Why?"

“Because it will take a strong man to hold Eric Johansen’s daughter. I suppose I have a father complex, but the man I marry must be as strong and ruthless as he is.”

“Let’s see just how serious you are,” he said. He jerked her roughly to him and kissed her until she was breathless. Most women would have yielded completely or slapped his face if they had been kissed like that, but she did neither.

“Does that satisfy you that I mean what I say?” she demanded.

“It does—for the time being.”

“What more do you want?” she challenged.

“That you be able to resist seduction.”

Inga laughed. “I thought I was the one doing the seducing.”

“You are resisted, as I said—temporarily.”

Paladin’s blood was pounding more than he liked. He was used to beautiful women, and as a rule he could yield to their charms, or resist them like a gentleman. It wouldn’t be easy with Inga. She would be his for the asking, and she would be a wife to be proud of, but he wasn’t ready to be monopolized by any woman. She was the kind who would want to own a man, body and mind. The challenge to match wills with her was almost as strong as the urge of sex.

Inga said rather shakily, “You are what is called a he-man, yet I think where women are concerned, my friend, you are basically pretty timid.”

As usual, he took refuge in the classics. “ ‘The mind once maimed or mangled with love, though it be never so well cured by reason or cooled by wisdom, yet there will appear a scar by which one may guess the mind hath been pierced, and a blemish whereby one may judge the heart hath been stained.’ ”

“I had no idea your heart had been so badly mutilated.”

“I was quoting a man named John Lyly. The function of a prophet is to warn of what might happen. It is wise to heed the prophets.”

This kind of danger was new to him, and he wasn’t sure that he had the skill to deal with a woman in love; particularly since it would be so easy to reciprocate. He doubted that he would ever find a woman who would appeal to him so much, but until his search for Breck Helm was finished he could not think of marriage. And maybe not then. He was relieved when Inga suggested that they should be starting back.

It was after dark before they got back to the sawmill, and Eric and another man were waiting on the porch. “A fine time of day to be getting in, this is,” Eric said angrily.

“It was my fault, Father,” Inga said. “I was showing Paladin the country and I lost my way. Hello, Arthur.”

The man she had addressed looked small compared to Eric Johansen, yet he was of good height. His voice had an authoritative rasp as he said: "You take too many chances, Ingrid. You can't just take up with anybody. You should have stayed in San Francisco."

Inga dismounted, and Norton kissed her. Neither of them put much into it, Paladin thought, but he felt a throb of instant dislike and jealousy toward Arthur Norton.

His unfavorable impression increased during supper. Norton treated him like a servant, and he had a proprietary manner toward Inga that caused Paladin to wonder how a high-spirited girl like Inga had ever got engaged to him, and how she could tolerate his condescending treatment.

Norton was a little too handsome, but he looked hard as nails. He was older than Paladin had expected, somewhere around forty, and his clothes were expensive yet serviceable. His tawny mustache didn't disguise the lines of a hard and cruel mouth. He was not a man to be underestimated.

Both Norton and Eric were giving Inga a bad time. Finally Eric said: "Arthur thinks that if you can't stay put you should get married right away, and I agree with him. A woman needs a man to look after her."

She replied cuttingly, "Yes. A real man."

"If you'll excuse me," Paladin said, and left the table.

CHAPTER 9

In the morning Paladin had a word with Rod Jefferson. "How does it feel to earn an honest dollar?" he inquired.

"I haven't seen the dollar yet, but it's not as frightening as I thought it would be. I'm a timekeeper. And by the way, Johansen hired three other new men yesterday. Two of them are those men you tied up, and the other is one of the men I followed from Walla Walla."

"They didn't lose much time. Did they recognize you?"

"I don't think so. Johansen put the one I thought I recognized by his voice to work in the commissary, and the others are working with the horses," Rod informed.

"Good. That'll give you a chance to watch 'em. I want to know if they get in touch with Norton, the superintendent." Paladin took out the IOU's he had been holding and handed them to Rod with a smile. "You got a job, and whether you hang onto it or not is up to you."

"You mean well, Paladin, but I never thought you'd use them against me. How long are you staying?"

"Not very long, I have an idea."

It had puzzled Paladin why Norton would have wanted to kidnap his fiancée, and he had thought somebody else was back of it. But if the men who had followed Inga to the Potlatch were working with Norton it could only mean that Norton was unsure of her, and had planned to use her to get domination over her father. A kidnaping could have been planned for San Francisco; probably to get Johansen out of the timber. If the old man could be forced to turn his business over to Norton it wouldn't matter much whether Inga married the man or not. The Johansens were in far greater danger than they realized.

Paladin remained around the mill most of the day, and saw nothing of Inga, her father, or Norton. Once he caught sight of Eli watching him, but the fellow quickly dodged back out of sight.

Late in the afternoon Rod came looking for him. "The old man told me he wanted to see you up at the office. He said, 'Find your friend and send him up here,' and it didn't sound as if he meant that my friends were necessarily his friends."

"I'd better go see him."

"And that fellow I overheard in Walla Walla had quite a talk with Norton in the commissary. His name, incidentally, is Mel Rutledge.

There could still be a kidnaping, couldn't there?"

"You'd hardly expect Norton to kidnap the woman he's going to marry, would you?"

"No, I guess not, but him and Rutledge acted mighty confidential."

"Just keep your eyes open," Paladin advised.

Paladin found the lumber baron alone in his office, and Eric's manner was grim and forbidding. "I want you out of here by sunup," he said.

"I was under the impression that I was working for your daughter."

"And all you've done is make love to her. My daughter is not going to marry any tramp."

"Did she say I had asked her?"

"She said she was going to marry you, and I told her I'd see you dead first. So get out while you can."

Paladin took out one of his cards and passed it over. Eric glanced at it carelessly, then blinked. "So she took up with a hired gunman," he roared. "That does it. You travel."

"As the card plainly says I expect to get paid for traveling," Paladin said coldly.

"Inga said she promised you five hundred a month. I'll pay you for one month now."

"She hired me, and she's got to be the one to pay me. But before I go I've got something to tell you."

"I will not listen," Johansen shouted.

"Oh, yes, you will. You'll listen good." Paladin's gun slid out of the holster, and when Eric looked down he saw the muzzle pointing straight at his stomach.

"You'll never get out of this camp alive," Eric warned.

Unmoved, Paladin said quietly: "Inga is too nice a girl to have her life ruined by a blind, stupid old fool of a father. The men who tried to kidnap her are right here in this camp, and they're being paid by your would-be son-in-law."

"Lies!"

"Give me a little time and I'll prove it. If you haven't already turned everything over to Norton, in case of your death you mean to and you'll find yourself awfully dead as soon as you do it."

"And you t'ink Aye would believe a crazy yarn like that by a fortune grabber? You don't know me, Mister. I'm going to call my rough crew and have 'em run you out right now."

"Call 'em, Johansen, but call Norton down here first. And remember that I've got a gun on you."

"I won't do it," the man refused.

"Then I'll have to. And don't you move out of that chair."

Paladin stepped to the door, and called to a man a short distance away. "Go up to the house and tell Norton Mr. Johansen wants to see him."

The man had only time to look up when a bullet splintered the frame of the door within two inches of Paladin. He sprang back. "It looks like we're under siege together, old man," he said.

"Nonsense. I'll put a stop to that. Get out of my way," Eric roared, and made for the door. Feeling sure that Johansen would be killed if he showed himself Paladin brought the barrel of his gun down on the lumber king's head, and Johansen sprawled face downward on the floor.

If the office was surrounded Paladin would be shot down if he tried to leave, and if he remained Johansen would accuse him of attempted murder.

He tried the front door again and a bullet drove him back. He rushed to the back door and made a long, twisting leap, but a bullet tugged at his shirt. He dived forward and rolled, and a second bullet barely missed him.

He had marked the pile of lumber the bullet had come from, and a moment later he saw Eli's head appear around the end of the pile. Paladin fired from where he lay on the ground. Eli spun around and fell, a bullet in the center of his forehead.

Twisting as he ran Paladin got between the two ricks of lumber and raced to get behind the man who had first shot at him. It was Pete, but the fellow was standing with both hands in the air, and behind him was Rod Jefferson.

"Where's Rutledge?" Paladin barked. "Answer straight, or I'll blow you to hell."

"At the house," the man answered.

"Good work, Rod. Hold him here," Paladin said. He ran toward the house and saw Rutledge leading in three saddled horses. The man hadn't seen him and Paladin made a run for the back of the house as the man disappeared around the front. He burst into the kitchen where Hilda regarded him with frightened eyes.

"Where's Inga?" he asked, and Hilda made a helpless gesture toward the front room.

As Paladin burst into the room Norton swung Inga in front of him. There was a gun in his hand. "Go ahead and shoot, Paladin," Norton said coolly. "You'll kill her, and then I'll kill you. Drop your gun."

Paladin let the gun fall. Resistance would only get Inga killed. At

the same time Rutledge came in the other way.

"Now, Inga, will you come along peaceably, or do I kill him?" Norton asked.

"I'll go with you," she said.

"A sensible decision, my dear. Tie him up, Rutledge."

"Are you fool enough to think Johansen will turn his property over to you when you can be got on a kidnaping charge?" Paladin said.

"He's already turned it over to me, though he don't know it," Norton jeered. "The whole business has already been sold to a firm in San Francisco. All I need is one letter of confirmation and Eric will write it to save his darling daughter."

"No matter where you go, Norton, I'll find you and I'll kill you," Paladin said, the words sounding impotent even to his own ears.

"I seriously doubt that you'll ever kill anybody again, gunman, and you'll certainly never get pretty little Inga or her father's money," Norton sneered. "It's too bad Inga forced my hand when she told her father she was going to marry you."

Paladin caught Inga's eyes upon him questioningly. She had jumped the gun on him, too, but that was a matter for the future, if there was going to be any future. Right now the problem was to keep Norton from getting away, and he noticed that Norton had let Inga step away from him as he hurriedly gave instructions to Rutledge.

As Rutledge stepped forward to do his job Paladin pumped his left hand into the man's stomach, and Rutledge doubled over in pain. Paladin's concealed derringer was in his hand, and as Norton raised his gun Paladin fired a bullet into his brain. The man died with a million dollars almost within his grasp. A well directed punch stretched Rutledge cold on the floor.

"Where is my father?" Inga cried.

"Probably on his way here with his men to hang me. I had to knock him out."

Within five minutes they saw Eric charging toward the house at the head of twenty of his men. Inga and Paladin stepped out on the porch to confront him.

"Get away from that man, Ingrid. He tried to murder me, and we're going to hang him," Eric roared.

"Don't be a fool, Father. He has just saved your life, and mine," Inga said impatiently.

"This lump on my head don't feel like it. Get back in the house and stay there," Eric bellowed. "Where is Arthur?"

"Arthur is dead. He had already put over a deal that would ruin you, and if Paladin hadn't killed him he would have given you one

choice: turn everything over to him, or let him kill me.”

“I don’t believe it,” Eric shouted, but his certainty was somewhat shaken.

Paladin said: “There were a couple of New Englanders you should know better, Johansen. One of them, Emerson, said, ‘Truth is too simple for us; we do not like those who unmask our illusions.’ The other, Thoreau, said, ‘It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, the other to hear.’ Inga is speaking the truth, but you won’t hear because you won’t give up your illusion that your judgment of people is always right.”

“What proof that she is right? Your word?”

“Maybe we can get more. Come inside, but leave your roughnecks where they are,” Paladin invited.

After mentally debating the issue Eric muttered an order to his foreman then reluctantly went into the house. He frowned as he saw Norton on the floor, and saw Rutledge just regaining consciousness. “I don’t like this,” he said.

“Search Norton,” Paladin directed Inga. “You may find something that will enlighten your father.”

Distasteful though she found the task Inga went through the dead man’s pockets, and found something that interested her.

She said: “Here, Eric, is the letter Arthur intended to make you sign. It directs Jared Carter to complete the deal for the transfer of the Johansen Lumber Company to Bostwick & Ewing in accordance with an agreement Arthur Norton had already made with them.”

“Those pirates!” Eric thundered. “They are the ones been trying to cut my throat for years. Let me see that.”

Inga handed over the letter, and Eric’s frown deepened as he read it.

“Here are more letters on the same subject,” Inga said as she leafed through the packet of letters she had taken from Norton’s pocket.

Eric Johansen looked utterly crushed. “He planned to do this to me even if he was married to you,” he said dully.

“He never did much want to marry me, and he knew I didn’t care for him,” she said. “I might have gone through with the marriage to please you, but Arthur knew it would never last, so he was protecting himself in advance.”

Paladin saw Rutledge edging toward the door and called sharply, “Hold it. You’ve got some talking to do.”

“I don’t know nothin’,” the fellow said.

“Maybe I can help you remember some things.”

“No, wait,” Eric said. “Aye t’ink he talk to me better.” He caught the

man's neck in a hamlike hand, and after one squeeze Rutledge was babbling like a brook. He had been in Norton's confidence for a long time, and knew that Norton was taking no chances on marrying the property. Johansen growled ominously when the man said that Norton had been in the employ of Bostwick & Ewing when he first came to work for Eric.

There was a temporary interruption when some of Eric's men appeared with Rod Jefferson and Howard's man Pete. It didn't take long for Pete to admit his part in the conspiracy, though he contended that he and Eli and Ned Howard had known nothing of the affair until Rutledge had come along and hired them. He had tried to kill Paladin, but not Johansen. Eric gave orders to have both Rutledge and Pete locked up.

According to Rutledge, Norton had planned to have Johansen murdered while Inga was in San Francisco; then after he married Inga his power of attorney would give him the necessary authority to sell the company and turn the assets into cash. Inga's unexpected return had spoiled that, and when he learned that Inga would not marry him he was forced to try to kidnap her and get the letter of confirmation of sale from Eric. That the murder of Eric would be the next sequence was inevitable.

Paladin wasn't sure whether he liked Johansen or not, though he found things about him to admire. Paladin had killed a couple of men, and was glad that Johansen had the influence to keep him from being arrested. Inga had impressed it on her father that he would have been a dead man had she not returned with Paladin, but he was too proud a man to feel much gratitude. The autocrat, whether political, financial or domestic, was never a lovable character, and Johansen could qualify under all three categories.

Before the evening was over Eric called him in for a private talk. He said, "I need a man like you. I'll never give another man the authority I gave Norton, but as my daughter's husband you will be second in command."

"I'm flattered," Paladin said, "but marriage with your daughter, and it certainly sounds attractive for she is a beautiful and intelligent woman, happens to be her idea, not mine."

"You mean to tell me—"

"Now hold it a second before you start accusing me of trifling with your daughter's affections," Paladin interrupted. "The time may come when I'll ask for Inga's hand, but right now all I'm interested in is the five thousand dollars I was promised for finding the men she thought were trying to murder you. I think I've earned that."

"You are married, perhaps?"

"I am not married, but I have my own work to do. Call it vendetta if you like, but there is no matrimony in my immediate future."

Eric threw back his head and laughed. "That Inga," he said. "It is good she finds a man she cannot twist around her finger."

Paladin wasn't so sure she could not. He had a warmth of feeling when he thought of her that had never happened to him before. He had to talk to her.

When he stepped outside after talking with Eric he found Inga waiting for him on the porch. "Let's walk down by the millpond," she suggested, and snuggled her hand in his.

Paladin was acutely conscious of the romantic surroundings: the gentle symphony of the wind sweeping through the pine tops, bringing the scent of pine from lumber and sawdust; the hoarse croaking of frogs from the millpond, and a beautiful woman by his side with romance and marriage on her mind.

"Let's not disturb the night watchman at the mill," she said, and led him on a detour along a path that was hard to see. Presently they were close to the dark water which had just enough motion to keep the logs bobbing up and down.

They stopped when they heard the splash of an alarmed bullfrog, and waited for his querulous croak. "That must be the grandfather of all bullfrogs," Paladin said when a deeper-voiced frog answered from the other side of the pond.

She turned to him and held up her lips. He took her in his arms and kissed her. "You wouldn't trifle with a girl's affections, would you?" she breathed.

He answered her with Hamlet: " 'I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?' "

She stood away from him, but he could see her blue eyes studying him. Finally, she said, "I take it you are trying to tell me that you are not the marrying kind."

"You couldn't have put it neater."

"A modest maiden would accept her dismissal in tears and retire to her chamber to soothe her broken heart in solitude. But I am not a modest maiden as you know very well. I fight for what I want. My father wants you to stay, and you could have quite a future."

"The only thing that really attracts me here is standing right beside me. That is hard to give up."

"It's not necessary."

“From my point of view it is. There is a man I’ve got to find and destroy. In the process I may be destroyed myself, for he is an able foe. If the time ever comes when I can offer you something besides widowhood, I’ll look you up.”

“I can share danger, and I might be a help. If you don’t want Eric’s money we can live without it.”

“I am sure of that, but it would be a one-sided arrangement. I am leaving for San Francisco tomorrow.”

“There are many beautiful women there,” she sighed.

“I am not looking for a woman. When I do I’ll come looking for you, Inga.”

“Then I suppose I must be satisfied with that. You have heard, haven’t you, that ‘hell hath no fury like a woman scorned?’”

“I’ve heard it, and I don’t believe you will ever consider yourself scorned.”

“No, I won’t, but I may pursue you until I am. Don’t run too far, Paladin, or too fast.”

“I’ll remember. I don’t want to risk your fury.”

He drew her to him and kissed her tenderly. They walked back to the house.

CHAPTER 10

Inga was not at breakfast, and Paladin and Eric ate alone. Eric repeated his offer to make Paladin the second man in his company.

Paladin said: "It's the most flattering offer I've ever had, and I'm appreciative. But I'm not a businessman, and you have little use for a man of my trade."

"If Inga failed to keep you there is no use for me to try," Eric said, and he didn't seem too much disappointed. "I owe you five thousand dollars, but I'll make it ten. Will you take my check on a San Francisco bank?"

"I will—but make it five thousand. That was the sum agreed upon."

"If there is any favor I can do—"

"There is. Keep Rod Jefferson here and make a man of him."

"I'll work the tail off him," Eric grinned.

"Good."

Paladin hunted up Rod to say goodbye. He said, "You've got a chance to make a man of yourself here, Rod, and I think you've got the stuff to do it. I'm making you a present of Bucephalus."

"Thanks. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. Keep an eye on Inga, and if she ever needs help you let me know."

Eric, too, had a favor to ask. He said: "No one is going to know about Norton for a while. I want you to find Jared Carter and march him into Bostwick's office and make him talk. I think you know what to have him say. I want Bostwick to know he better not monkey with Eric Johansen."

"It'll be my pleasure," Paladin promised.

He was going out to Lewiston with one of Eric's rigs, and from there would take the stage to Portland, and catch a boat to San Francisco. He was waiting for the rig with his duffle bag at his feet and wondering if Inga would come out to say goodbye when she appeared in her gray traveling dress. Hilda trailed behind her, loaded down with luggage. Paladin glanced appealingly at Eric but met only an amused twinkle in the timber king's eye.

Inga smiled at Paladin, then kissed her father and said, "Goodbye, Eric. Don't worry about me. I'll be in good hands."

"It's Paladin I'm worried about, not you," Eric grinned a bit frozenly. "Take care of yourself, Paladin."

"I'll try not to murder your daughter, sir."

Inga kissed Hilda and stepped gaily into the carriage, and after a moment Paladin followed and seated himself beside her.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed. "I am aware of your slaughterous thoughts without you pinching my leg till it's black and blue."

"I regret that I didn't go back the way we came, for then I could have handed you over to Bigfoot with good grace," he growled.

The trip to San Francisco turned out to be a pleasant one, especially on the steamship. There were no more dangerously amorous adventures, and Inga talked no more about love and marriage. Yet she was making progress for Paladin kept thinking that she would be a nice person to spend a life with, and he guessed that the minx knew what he was thinking. There was gambling on the ship but he kept away from it, preferring to spend his time in her company.

She was too seasoned a traveler to become excited even when they passed through the Golden Gate. Paladin took her to the Carlton, and after greeting his friend Hey Boy told him to see that the lady had everything she needed.

"Velly nice lady," Hey Boy said. From the fact that he was careless with the one troublesome word he had been so careful to master Paladin knew that Hey Boy had a worry on his mind.

Paladin bathed and arrayed himself in the finest clothes he owned and went down to dinner with Inga. She, too, had improved the time making herself beautiful, and he thought her the best-looking and best-dressed woman in the place. Men and women looked at her with divergent interest. It was the kind of living Paladin liked and he ordered the meal carefully, and was especially selective about the wine.

Inga said, "I see women looking at me as though I were a fallen woman. Is it my looks, or your reputation?"

"A little of both, perhaps. They are advertising their own virtue; not realizing that a woman might as well boast of having a clubfoot as to boast of being virtuous. Some things had better just be assumed."

"Stupid women have their uses—they give us bright ones unusual opportunities—but I don't like being looked at as if I were a harlot."

"A man is flattered if women think he is a roue. A woman is insulted if men think she is a harlot."

"There is considerable difference. It is not that she has so little that enrages a woman, but the fact that another woman may have more. We women are used to dealing with envy," she said.

"And they may well envy you."

"Thank you, sir. You slay men with bullets and women with

flattery.”

Paladin said in a low voice, “Your friend Jared Carter has just come in. This might be the place for the inviting look and the beckoning finger.”

Inga caught Carter’s eye just as he was about to retreat. She smiled and nodded, and after a moment of hesitation he came over to their table.

He said, “Inga! I am delighted to see you again. I thought you were in Idaho.”

“And from your expression I take it you were also under the impression that I was dead,” Paladin said.

“I didn’t quite catch the joke,” Carter said stiffly.

“Sit down, we have things to talk about,” Paladin said, and beckoned the waiter.

“You did go to Idaho, didn’t you?” Carter asked Inga.

“Oh, indeed. You’ll be glad to know that my father is well. I suppose you have heard about Arthur Norton’s death?”

The man’s nervous gasp showed that he had not heard. “It’s hard to believe. You are not in mourning.”

“Should I be?”

“He was your fiancé.”

“That was before I met Mr. Paladin,” she said blandly.

“Congratulations,” Carter said weakly. “Now if you’ll excuse me—”

Paladin’s powerful fingers clamped down on the man’s knee. “Sit down,” he grated. “Papers were found on Norton’s body which prove that you were his confidential man in his scheme to ruin and murder Mr. Johansen.”

“No, no,” Carter protested.

“You wired Norton so that he could kidnap Inga and force her father to come to terms. The kidnapers are all either dead or in custody. So you are going to Bostwick’s office with me in the morning and tell him the whole story.”

“I have nothing to tell.”

“You’ll think of something or spend the next ten years of your life in prison. You meet me here in the lobby at ten o’clock in the morning. I think you have seen my business card, but in case you have lost it here is another. I am prepared to travel a long way, Carter, if you don’t keep that appointment.”

Carter put the card in his pocket as though it were something he had to hide in a hurry. “Norton forced me into this business,” he said defensively. “If I hadn’t done what he wanted he would have ruined

me. I—I'll see you in the morning."

"'If fortune does not change men it unmasks them,' " Paladin said.

"What about women?"

"God made many women smart, some clever, and a few good."

"I would rather be clever than good."

"I don't think you missed your mark," he retorted.

"Well," she shrugged, "you can't have everything. Are you staying in San Francisco?"

"Not long."

"And you're not telling me where you are going."

"No."

He had no idea where he was going, except that he intended to resume his search for Breck Helm. If he told her what stage he was taking he would probably find her on it. In her way she was as direct in her approach to what she wanted as her father. If any woman ever caught him, he could have told her, it would be while he was pursuing her.

He found Carter waiting for him the next morning, and cut short the man's protestations of innocence. "My job is to see that you talk, not to listen," he said curtly.

Carter had no difficulty getting into the inner sanctum of Mr. Bostwick. Paladin took an instant dislike to the man behind the desk. He was middle-aged, bald, with a button of a nose and sharp, greedy eyes that were as acquisitive as a pack rat's.

"A real pleasure to see you, Jared," he said. "And who is the distinguished-looking gentleman with you?"

"My card," Paladin said.

Bostwick's false smile faded. Like most greedy men he was afraid of the unfamiliar. "I'm afraid I don't have any use for your services," he said coldly.

"I didn't come to offer them. I represent Eric Johansen."

"What has that to do with me?" Bostwick inquired, though the sweat started on his forehead.

"That may depend on your future actions. You were foolish to conspire with Arthur Norton to commit murder and extortion."

"Such reckless charges could get you jailed," Bostwick almost screamed.

Paladin noticed the softness of the man's hands—hands useful only to write checks and letters. He contrasted those small hands with those of Eric Johansen; hands that had been toughened by axe and saw. One man was a worker, the other a manipulator. He was going to

enjoy seeing the manipulator crawl.

“Carter will explain it to you,” he said.

“Arthur Norton is dead, and some papers were found on him which implicate you, Mr. Bostwick, in a scheme to murder Johansen so that you could get his property for less than it was worth from Norton,” Carter explained jerkily.

“This sounds like blackmail to me, Carter.”

“I’m not asking anything from anybody, but I’m not going to stand trial for being an accessory to protect you,” Carter defied.

“I’ll have you both thrown out of my office,” the badgered businessman threatened.

Paladin seized one of the man’s fragile hands and squeezed it till Bostwick cried out with pain. “You are hardly the man to threaten violence, Mr. Bostwick, even by proxy,” Paladin said. “Nor can your business stand having you exposed as a murderous conniver. Do you want the whole story printed in the San Francisco papers?”

Bostwick’s defiance wilted like lettuce under a hot sun. “No, no, of course not. It was a business deal. I didn’t know what Norton was up to,” he declared.

“We can prove that you did.”

“What do you want?”

“First, a written admission that you conspired with Norton to steal Johansen’s business. Then I am authorized to make a settlement with you in the matter of damages.”

“Damages? I didn’t get anything,” Bostwick cried.

“But Mr. Johansen has been subjected to persecution and financial loss. He will be satisfied with a certified check for fifty thousand dollars, and your written promise not to interfere with his business again. I will personally see to it that the agreement is kept. You have my card,” Paladin stated grimly.

“You would—kill me?”

“I would kill you.”

Paladin stopped at the bank and cashed Johansen’s five-thousand-dollar check. Then he returned to the Carlton and sent Hey Boy up to Inga’s room to ask if she would receive company.

“House rules say no can do, but for you I do,” Hey Boy said. “You talk to me pletty soon, maybe. I have big trouble.”

Paladin glanced at Hey Boy cannily. Trouble with Hey Boy was habitual, but usually small. This time he seemed really serious. Paladin said, “You have a proverb: ‘never call a tiger to chase away a

dog.’ ”

“We have another one. ‘If you do not enter the tiger’s den you cannot catch his cubs.’ ”

“All right, Hey Boy, I will see you later.”

Hey Boy returned quickly with word that Inga would see Paladin at once.

“I thought sure you had deserted me,” she said, when he entered her room.

“No, I’ve just been doing a little collecting for you,” he replied as he handed her Bostwick’s certified check.

“I don’t understand this. How did you get it?”

“After Bostwick listened to Jared Carter he was taken down by a sudden attack of generosity.”

“You are a bandit—but I can use the money.”

“You’ll notice that the check is made out to your father.”

“But I could cash it, and we could see a lot of the world on it,” she said impishly.

“I am a bandit, remember; not a thief.”

“I’m sorry I called you that, but you are entitled to a commission for collecting, whatever it was for.”

“I’ve got my pay.”

“Here is more.” She came close and kissed him.

“It’s adequate, but I think I’d better leave before your generosity overwhelms me.”

“Not until you tell me what happened with Bostwick.”

He found a chair and recounted the interview. Inga’s eyes sparkled as she listened. “Father would have loved that,” she said. “It proves that you are two of a kind—both pirates. What happens to Jared Carter?”

“I think he’ll be leaving by the first boat. And I’m afraid Hey Boy will strain his ears if I don’t get out of here.” He opened the door suddenly, but Hey Boy was scurrying down the corridor.

“Come to my room, Hey Boy,” Paladin called. His room was on the same floor as Inga’s, and Hey Boy came slowly back. “ ‘Who sits in a well to observe the sky does not see very much,’ Hey Boy.”

“ ‘When the thunder is very loud there is no rain,’ ” Hey Boy replied unabashed.

“All right. What do you want to see me about?”

“I would not ask for your esteemed services for myself, but for my venerable uncle—” Hey Boy bowed low.

"What's wrong with your venerable uncle? Did a slave girl escape?"

"You have maybe heard of the Bow Hong Dow?"

"A tong devoted mostly to murder and extortion, I have heard."

"They threaten my uncle's life. More than money is at stake. His honor is involved."

Presently Paladin got the whole story. Hey Boy's uncle was a merchant in a mining boom town in Nevada called Owyhee. Like most Western boom towns it had a large Chinese population where the Chinese worked over the ground the white miners had abandoned. If a Chinaman staked a claim it was always jumped, but being thrifty and industrious the Chinese always managed to save money.

Owyhee was isolated in the mountains, but because of robbers and road agents no Chinaman dared try to get out with his money. Those who had tried it had been murdered. Moreover, raids were frequently made on the shanties in which they lived.

The coolies had turned to Ah Kee, an honest and respected man, and asked him to keep their money for them. He had accepted the responsibility, and baffled the white outlaws. But now, according to Hey Boy, the criminal Bow Hong Dow tong had sent hatchetmen to Owyhee to demand that Ah Kee turn all the money in his possession over to them. If it was not done they threatened vengeance not only on Ah Kee, but his kinsmen—which included Hey Boy. Hey Boy had sent his uncle one of Paladin's cards.

"Have you been threatened?" Paladin asked.

"Those who fly low do not fall." "

"Well, you keep on flying low. Maybe I'll just take a look at this Owyhee."

"My honorable ancestors will be deeply grateful."

"And I must look to them for my pay?" Paladin's eyebrows lifted.

"Honorable ancestors all dead," Hey Boy said solemnly, "Venerated Ah Kee uphold honor of ancient house. But I pay you hundred dollars for expense."

"Keep your money. I'll settle with Ah Kee if I can do him any good. Does he speak English?"

"Oh, much better than I. Venerated uncle very learned man. Oxford University. He write you this letter. You read, please?"

Wonderingly Paladin took the neatly folded note. The handwriting was small and neat and clearly legible.

Honorable Paladin:

I have received your card from my insignificant nephew. I beg a thousand pardons for the liberty he has taken. He is truthful,

and what he has told you of my situation is probably correct.

I have in my possession a considerable amount of gold that belongs to my countrymen, but in a manner of speaking I am under siege. If you can help me preserve the savings of those who have trusted me any wealth of my own shall be yours.

You will be in great danger, but I understand you are a very brave man. You will be most welcome in my contemptible home.

Your abject servant, Ah Kee.

The missive held the ring of sincerity, and Paladin was aware of the difficulty of a Chinaman getting justice in the lawless parts of the West. Though it meant a postponement of his own campaign it was the kind of assignment that appealed to him.

He said, "I'll have a look at this Owyhee place. And after I leave you will tell Miss Johansen that I have sailed for the Sandwich Islands."

"He who can speak well can also lie well," Hey Boy said.

"Confucious said, 'A four-horse chariot cannot overtake the spoken word,' so watch your tongue, Hey Boy."

Paladin spent some time learning what he could about Owyhee. Every mining town in mineral-rich Nevada had tentacles which reached to San Francisco, and Owyhee was known as a town of unproved promise with a population that might be anything between three and ten thousand people—"not counting Chinamen," as one informant put it.

The best way to reach the place was to take the new Central Pacific railroad to a place called Elko, and from there by stage to his destination. He made the necessary arrangements for leaving the city the next morning, then took Inga out for dinner in the evening. It was in the nature of a farewell dinner, though she didn't know it.

The mission he was undertaking would be a dangerous one, and he wanted no woman waiting for his return. He would never find a more charming or desirable woman than Inga, but the hazards of his occupation would not permit him to think seriously of marriage. He ordered the best dinner available, and the excellent wine brought a becoming flush to Inga's cheeks.

"Do you want to know my opinion of you, Paladin?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I think you are a gentleman, a scholar—and a scoundrel."

"You are at least a third right. I despise gentlemen, I do not have learning enough to be a scholar, and I plead guilty to being a scoundrel."

"You know I didn't mean that—though I think you could break a

woman's heart."

"Heart-breaking has to be worked at, and I am far too lazy. They have a ballroom here; shall we dance?"

"I don't mind—but you're working at it," she charged.

They danced a number of times and he held her close. He had no doubt of her infatuation, but didn't know just how serious it was. He was suffering from the same disease, and the only remedy for either of them was separation. It might cost him a million dollars, but the recompense would be freedom, and he valued that highly.

After a few dances and a few drinks he took her back to her room. "Won't you come in?" she asked.

"Nothing would give me more pleasure—but I won't. Good night, Inga." He would have kissed her but a couple was coming down the corridor, and he merely gallantly raised her hand to his lips.

He heard the woman say, "Why don't you ever do that, John?"

"Maybe I can get an introduction to that gambler for you, and let him do it," the man retorted. "That's probably the only work he ever does." They entered their room.

There was a note under Paladin's door from the detective agency he had engaged to help him find Breck Helm. It read: "We think the man you are looking for may be staying at the Fremont. He is registered under the name of Captain Slater, and is trying to sell stock in a southern Nevada mine called the Panamacker."

It was too late to change his plans, and too late to get in touch with the detectives. He wrote a note to them with instructions to invest a thousand dollars for him in stock in the Panamacker mine. In the morning he gave the note and a thousand dollars to Hey Boy to deliver to the detective agency.

"You go into business, Mr. Paladin?" Hey Boy asked.

"No, Hey Boy, but as one of your proverbs has it, 'He who would lead an ox to water must first wet his own feet.' " Twenty minutes later he was on board the train.

CHAPTER 11

The country through which Paladin found himself riding reminded him much of the mountainous region where he and Inga had encountered the renegade Bigfoot. Except for the mineral wealth beneath the surface he was sure nobody but the Indians would ever want it. From the high mountains, prongs green with juniper thrust down into narrow valleys covered with sagebrush. Rocky cliffs and ledges thrust out from the face of the ridges.

It was forbidding country with pack trails only recently made by wandering prospectors and their burros, but the dusty ruts of a freight road which Paladin had been told to follow made it impossible to get lost.

At a boom town called Blitzen he had stopped and bought a horse and saddle instead of waiting for the uncertain stage to Owyhee. He wore his usual black outfit and sat straight in the saddle. It was a road not crowded with traffic.

At one place the road cut across the shoulder on a ridge along the top of a cliff, and the jumbled rocks above could not quite crowd out the thrifty juniper trees. He was halfway across when he was startled by a cold voice which commanded, "Hold it, stranger. Keep your hands right where they are."

A masked man stepped out from behind a boulder above the road, and he could see the head and shoulders and rifle of another masked man behind him. He had not expected to be held up while going in that direction. He had a little money in his wallet and several hundred dollars in a money belt underneath his shirt. The outlaws had him covered and they were businesslike in their procedure.

At the command of the spokesman he unbuckled his gun belt and let it fall, then handed over his wallet and watch. "You got any more money?" the man demanded.

"Plenty—in a San Francisco bank."

"Maybe you'd better write us out a check."

"You blackguards have a sense of humor, I see."

"Somebody might pay to get you back, though I don't see why they should."

"Take his horse," the other man said. "He looks like a long walk would do him good."

Paladin dismounted slowly, and the man said, "We'll have to tie you

up for a while as we're expecting company."

They were professionals, and were giving him no chance to defend himself. They made him put his arms around a small juniper and tied his wrists together hurriedly, though rather sloppily. "Make a sound and you'll get a bullet in the back," he was warned.

Paladin learned that they were waiting for the stage from Owyhee, and were busier watching for it than they were him. He found that he could circle the tree if he had to, and after considerable effort he worked the derringer in his sleeve down into his hand, and he kept it well concealed, after almost dropping it.

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you gentlemen to make an honest living?" he asked.

"A preacher, by God! And packin' a gun. Don't you believe in turning the other cheek?"

"No, I don't. I believe in punishing the evildoer."

"Fair enough. But you're in no position to punish anybody. We're riding high, and you're tied to a tree. Don't that show that we're smarter than you are?"

"A wise Frenchman said that mortal is a fool who, prospering, thinks his life has any strong foundation; since our fortune's course of action is the reeling way a madman takes, and no one person is happy all the time."

"You talk too much. Make a sound from now on and I'll shut you up for good," the man said.

Paladin could hear a rig coming, and the road agents took their places; one where he could keep an eye on Paladin. It was a four-horse stage, compelled to travel at a walk because of the steepness of the grade. There were two men on the box, one armed with a shotgun.

"Pull up, and lift 'em high," the head man of the bandits ordered.

The guard swung his shotgun, but too late. A slug caught him in the shoulder and he tumbled over the wheel to the ground. The driver stopped his team and raised both hands high.

The second outlaw came forward and ordered the four passengers out. One was a woman, and one a frightened Chinaman.

"Gawd, I hate Chinks," this outlaw said, and cold-bloodedly and deliberately fired a bullet into the Chinaman's brain. The woman fainted.

The man coolly holstered his gun and collected the valuables of the other two passengers, and took a sackful of gold dust from the body of the dead Chinaman. Then he raised the woman's skirt and took a roll of bills thrust into her stocking. From her apparel Paladin judged her to be from a red-light district.

While this was going on the other man made the driver throw down the express box, then forced him to unhitch his horses and give them a start down the road.

Paladin called, "You overlooked something, brother. My money belt."

"Well, thanks, I'll come up and get it," the leader laughed. He came up to the tree and started to rip open Paladin's shirt.

He heard the click of the derringer and saw the barrel pointed at his stomach. "Cut me loose quietly and carefully, or die in your tracks," Paladin hissed.

The man had no choice. A slug from that derringer could tear a hole through him any way he turned. He fumbled for his knife and cut the thongs as Paladin directed, and Paladin reached out and took the fellow's gun from its holster.

"Why don't you just shoot him?" the second outlaw called.

"You try it," Paladin answered as he stepped away from the tree. The man raised his gun, but Paladin's bullet caught him in the leg and he fell without firing a shot. One of the passengers got the man's gun on Paladin's order. Paladin marched his man down to the stage and stood guard while the driver tied both outlaws' hands behind their backs.

"I saw you standing up there, and I thought you were one of the bandits," the driver said.

"I thought the same thing about you," Paladin said dryly. "I think you'll find their horses, and mine, over in the next draw. Get them, and maybe we can catch your team."

"Not much use of that, for they'll circle back to Owyhee. We'd just as well wait for help."

"Get the horses anyway—and don't forget to come back."

The woman who had fainted was now on her feet, and she had missed the roll in her stocking. Furiously, she ripped the mask from the unwounded road agent, and then fell back with a gasp of surprise. "Dick Upjohn—the sheriff!" she cried.

"You had better let us go if you want to see another sun rise," the unveiled sheriff said.

"So you are a braggart as well as a crook," Paladin said.

The girl said, "You had better let 'em go, stranger. They've got a lot of friends in Owyhee."

"She's right," one of the male passengers said. "I wouldn't dare give testimony against them."

"You see, stranger, they might even be persuaded to testify that you held up the stage," Sheriff Upjohn smiled.

Paladin gave him closer attention. He was in his early thirties, fairly good-looking with cupidity and arrogance stamped on him like print.

"Any time you twist a twig you may find a hornet's nest," Paladin said.

"If you stir up this one I assure you you'll get stung," the sheriff said.

"Who is the reptile I shot in the leg?" Paladin asked the girl. He was a young fellow, probably not more than twenty-two, dressed like a range dandy and oozing conceit even with his hands tied and a wounded leg.

"That's Patsy Dugan," the girl answered. "He's killed three men in Owyhee already."

"Then it's time he got a rope around his neck."

Paladin turned his attention to the injured shotgun messenger, a fifty-year-old man who said his name was Jim Hawkins. Paladin made him as comfortable as possible. Hawkins had at least tried to use his gun.

Gooding, the driver, returned with the three horses, and volunteered to go for help. "Can you remember that you were held up by the sheriff?" Paladin asked.

"I can't remember much of anything. It all happened pretty fast," the man said.

"I think you had better stay here," Paladin said contemptuously. He turned to the girl. "Do you think you can go for help?" he asked.

"Sure. I'll tell the truth, but nobody is going to believe me. That Chinaman should have fainted like I did."

Upjohn started to say something, but Paladin closed his mouth with a hard clip to the jaw. Paladin handed the girl the roll of bills she had lost, and gave her a smile. "That faint was a dilly, Miss—"

"Celeste. I work, or did until I got fired, for Eva Lang at the Miner's Delight."

"You must know some prominent and respectable citizens."

"Do I!"

"Then find the most reliable man you know and tell him the straight truth. And give him my card." She was a chubby girl, and her blue eyes widened as she glanced at the card. Paladin shortened the stirrups of his own saddle so that she could ride comfortably and sent her on her way. Then he tried to inspire a little spirit of truthfulness in the others.

"You can't depend on them," Jim Hawkins said. "Everybody has been scared to death of a road agent gang, and when they find out the sheriff is the head of it they'll lie their heads off to keep out of

trouble.”

“They’ll be in worse trouble if they do,” Paladin said grimly for the benefit of the others.

This was an adventure he hadn’t counted on. He had seen intimidated frontier towns before, and a timid population could be worse than a lawless one. He wouldn’t know the true situation until he talked with Ah Kee.

More than two hours passed before a twelve-man posse galloped up from Owyhee. The leader was a big, red-faced man whose occupation was as plain as his mustache. Paladin knelt by the side of Jim Hawkins both to get information and to watch which of the possemen made optical obeisance to the sheriff.

“That’s Fred Swartz, the mayor,” Hawkins whispered. “Runs the Eureka saloon.”

Most of the possemen were the type that could be picked up at a saloon. “Who is the man with the full beard?” Paladin asked, referring to the one obvious exception.

“Jim Oakley, superintendent of the Mecca mine.”

“What happened here, Sheriff?” Swartz demanded.

Paladin got to his feet and said, “I am the man who sent for you, and I’ll do the talking. Your sheriff held up me and the stage, and if he opens his mouth till I get through he’ll be talking without teeth.”

“You the man who sent this card to me by a dance-hall girl?”

“It’s my card. You have a sheriff who robs stages as a sideline, and he has an awfully loose mouth. I want you to listen to these people before the sheriff has a chance to intimidate them.”

“This ain’t a court. They can talk when they get back to town. I’m takin’ over now,” the mayor said.

“That’s the sheriff’s job,” another man said, “Cut him loose, Mayor.”

“Not so fast,” Paladin said. “The sheriff is under citizen’s arrest for robbery and murder. There are things in his possession, and in that of his accomplice that I want an itemized receipt for. There are two bandanna masks, and certain valuables belonging to these two passengers which I want them to identify as being taken from them by the two road agents.”

He was sure that if he didn’t get the statement from the passengers now he would never get it. Mayor Swartz didn’t want to hear any statements yet, but Paladin forced him to listen; first to Jim Hawkins who told a straight story, and then to the passengers and driver who reluctantly confirmed the account. Oakley, the man with the beard, took down most of the statements in writing, and he was on Paladin’s side.

More men arrived with the stage horses, and Paladin, the wounded men, and the dead Chinaman rode in it to Owyhee, but in the confusion two of the possemen got away ahead of the stage.

It required an hour and a half to reach Owyhee, a raw new town at the edge of a rough basin in the mountains. There was evidence of placer mining everywhere, and some lode mining had already been started. Paladin noted that half the business houses on Main Street were saloons. He noted a new two-story hotel painted yellow with a sign on the front reading:

VIRGINIA HOTEL

Just beyond it he saw a Chinese store with the sign:

AH KEE. SILKS, MEDICINE & ANTIQUES

The posse had stopped in front of the city hall and jail. Paladin got out and pushed through the crowd. Sheriff Upjohn said, "I owe you an apology, Mister, for thinking you were a preacher. If I hadn't guessed wrong I'd have killed you."

"The civic-minded citizens of Owyhee will no doubt hang you and your friend," Paladin replied.

"You want to bet?"

"I figure your life is worth about ten cents. I'll wager that amount."

"Mister, you'll be dead long before I will; I'll guarantee that," Upjohn said viciously.

Mayor Swartz made a speech. "I want you men to go home until this matter is investigated. The law will take its course, and I won't stand for any mob violence."

"Hell of a sheriff you gave us, Swartz," a man said. "Hell, he's not even a good road agent."

"Never mind that. Nobody has been killed except a Chinaman, and everything taken in the robbery has been recovered."

Under the mayor's verbal bombardment the crowd broke up and wandered into the saloons. The temper of the town was being tested, and Paladin knew that Upjohn had plenty of friends who would try to save him. One of those friends it seemed obvious was Mayor Swartz.

Paladin saw a doctor take over the wounded men, Hawkins and Dugan, then he found his horse and had it cared for at a livery stable. It was dark by this time, and he went to the yellow hotel he had noted.

It was a clean-looking place, and a young woman of perhaps twenty-five was behind the desk. She was a striking-looking brunette

with hard eyes, and an expression that indicated that she was capable of taking care of herself. She was not pretty, but she was attractive. She turned the register around for him to sign, then read the signature.

“Paladin. So you’re the man who caught the sheriff in the stage robbery, and shot Patsy Dugan. I’ll give you the best room in the house; south front on the upper floor. Shall I show you up?”

“Don’t trouble yourself. Give me the key and I’ll find it. I suppose I can get supper?”

“Of course. I’m Sybil Sanderson. I own the hotel.”

“Pleased to know you, Mrs. Sanderson.”

“Everybody calls me Sybil. If there’s anything I can do for you let me know.”

On the surface it sounded pleasant enough, but Paladin somehow had the feeling that the woman was hating him with every fiber of her body.

He walked up the stairs, found his room, and walked over to the window before he made a light. The Eureka saloon was just across the street. A man in a room above the saloon with a rifle wouldn’t have to be a good shot to kill a man here with the blinds up and lamp burning. It was best to take precautions.

He poured water into a porcelain basin, lathered his face and shaved then went below. He found the man Oakley waiting for him in the lobby. Paladin invited the man with the long, silky beard to have supper with him.

Sybil Sanderson showed them to a table. “You’ll be quite the hero here, Mr. Paladin,” she said.

“I am not the stuff of which heroes are made,” he said. She summoned a waiter and went away. “Quite a woman,” Paladin said.

“I hope she don’t slip arsenic into your food,” Oakley said. “She is Sheriff Upjohn’s girl friend. If they hang Upjohn as they’re talking of doing she isn’t going to like you. She has been known to shoot a man.”

“As Job said, ‘All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust,’ ” Paladin replied.

“What brings you here, Paladin?” Oakley asked.

“To see a Chinaman named Ah Kee. I understand the Chinamen have a bad time here.”

“They always do. So far as I know Ah Kee is a fine old man and a sort of patriarch to the colony. They are plundered with impunity, and the sheriff has never lifted a hand to protect them.”

“What kind of a man is Mayor Swartz?”

“A windbag. He was elected because Upjohn supported him, and then he appointed Upjohn sheriff. Some of us would like to have decent government, but up to now nobody has had the courage to act,” Oakley said.

“And you?”

“I’ll act any time I can get some backing,” Oakley said.

After dinner Paladin walked to the door with Oakley, but just before he reached it he looked back and caught a look of unadulterated hatred on the face of Sybil Sanderson, though she looked away quickly. He had made enemies here of people he had never thought of meeting.

Before they parted he asked Oakley to find out where the girl Celeste was staying, and Oakley promised that he would.

He walked past the house of Ah Kee, found the door locked, and taking out one of his cards, scribbled Virginia Hotel on it, and stuck it in the crack of the door.

CHAPTER 12

Paladin crossed the street to the Eureka saloon, and one of the stage passengers hailed him. "Like to join in our poker game, Paladin?" he asked.

Paladin took a seat in the game.

"You're staying in town for the trial?" he asked.

"Not if I don't have to," replied the man who said his name was Grant. "The way I figure it a man is setting himself up to get murdered by testifying against the sheriff."

"Are you familiar with the Areopagitica?"

"The what?"

"It is Greek literature. In it a man named Isocrates made a speech which has in it much wisdom. Among other things he said, 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.' "

"You can run for all the garlands you want to, but I'm getting out of here," Grant said.

"Every man to his own notion," Paladin said.

The game broke up before midnight, for the saloon had practically emptied itself. Paladin had been a consistent winner of small stakes. He reached the street in time to see a drunken mob of nearly a hundred men marching on the jail. He fell in behind them, and their avowed purpose was to take Sheriff Upjohn out of jail and hang him. It would serve the ends of justice, but Paladin was irrevocably against mobs.

The men stopped in front of the jail where a flickering light burned above the door. At their shouts Mayor Swartz came out, his flesh quivering like jelly.

"We want Upjohn and Dugan," the man who seemed to be the leader shouted.

"You've got no right," Swartz yelled. "You don't even know Upjohn robbed that stage. He says it was that stranger. You can't hang him anyway because he's not here. I sent him and Dugan over to Blitzen."

The mob brushed past Swartz and into the jail. They were in an even more ugly mood when they came out. The husky miner who was the leader shoved Swartz back against the front of the jail. A sudden

silence settled over the crowd, and the miner's voice rang out distinctly. "You let 'em go because you knew Upjohn's men would free 'em before they got to Blitzen. That proves you're in with them, and this rope will fit your neck as well as it would Upjohn's." Another man dropped the noose over the mayor's neck, and a roar of approval went up from the mob. Too many men had been robbed and murdered for them to have any leniency in their hearts.

It was time for Paladin to take a hand. He leaped up beside Swartz, facing the burly miner, gun pointed at the man's heart.

"Take it off, Mister," he said. "I can kill you."

"Who're you?—Oh, the man Upjohn says robbed the stage. We can still—"

"I don't make idle threats. Take the rope off. I've got no quarrel with any of you men, and I'm saving you from something you'll always regret. I don't want to spill any blood, but if you force me I will. Yours first."

The miner was a big talker, but without the nerve to look into a loaded gun. He removed the rope from Swartz's neck and left it in the hands of his chief aid.

Suddenly regaining courage the mayor bellowed, "Come on now, get out of here. I represent the law in this town, and—"

"Will you shut up?" Paladin grated. "I'm none too sure myself you don't rate hanging."

"Just trying to do my duty," Swartz said meekly.

"I'll know better about that when I hear Upjohn and Dugan are in jail in Blitzen. And I noticed that you were quite willing to set the mob on me."

"I knew you were in the clear. Those fools would have hanged me."

"You know better than anybody whether you deserved it or not," Paladin told him.

The mob had worked off its frenzy in noise, and now wanted a drink. Paladin slipped away to the hotel. The lobby was empty, but was lighted by a chandelier from the ceiling. He went upstairs and unlocked the door; then threw it wide open and jumped back. A bullet from inside centered the very space where he would have been had he crossed the threshold.

He dived inside, landing on the floor and rolling twice while a second bullet went over him. The shot had come from behind the foot of the bed, and he launched himself at the spot. He grabbed a wrist as the man he had collided with went down beneath his assault. Paladin gave a quick twist and the fellow's gun fell to the floor. Paladin swung at a face he could scarcely see, and felt the man go limp. He kicked

the gun away and lighted the lamp. Its light revealed Patsy Dugan on the floor.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't shoot you," Paladin grated.

"Go ahead and shoot," Dugan snarled.

"I'd rather see you hanged. Stand up."

"I can't. I'm wounded."

"Then keep still." Paladin heard someone running down the corridor and moved over by the door.

"Did you get him, Patsy?" came Sybil Sanderson's voice.

Paladin caught her arm, dragged her into the room and flung her onto the bed. "You missed a bet, Sybil. You could have done better yourself," he said.

"You said you couldn't miss," she accused Dugan scornfully.

"Somebody tipped him off," he said bitterly.

"Must be I made a mistake," Paladin said. "I thought you were Upjohn's girl, Sybil, but it looks like Dugan is the lucky man."

"You'll see Dick Upjohn again," Sybil promised.

"Good. Which is Dugan's room?"

"Number Eight, down the hall," she said grudgingly.

"Good enough. I'll be using it tonight. Give me the key—give me all the keys." The hotel keys were on a big ring at her waist and he took them not too gently, while she cursed him steadily.

He went outside and locked the door, leaving them both inside. Sybil made it known with a mule-skinner's profanity that she didn't like being locked in a room in her own hotel. Paladin went to Number Eight and locked the door on the inside, but slept lightly indeed.

He was up at dawn, and hearing nothing inside his own room went downstairs. He found a fat Indian woman building a fire in the kitchen. "No breakfast till seven o'clock," she said grumpily.

"I'll wait," he said. He drew back as two young fellows entered the lobby and one of them shouted for Sybil. The Indian woman started out, but Paladin motioned her back.

"I'll tell 'em she's not up yet," he volunteered and stepped into the lobby.

"Who're you?" one of them demanded. "Where's Sybil?"

"She was taking care of Mr. Dugan. I'll show you the room if you like." He waved them up the stairs ahead of him. "The front room there," he told them.

One of them knocked, and the landlady's voice asked who it was. "It's Ace and Bob. Let us in, Sybil."

“Open the door. We’re locked in. That damned Paladin has the keys.”

They swung about, belligerent looks on their faces. “You Paladin?” Ace demanded.

“They call me that.”

“Kill him, Ace,” came the woman’s voice.

They started to draw, but he had them covered. Neither cared to be first to risk a bullet. They looked at each other and bolted precipitously down the stairs, and Paladin let them go.

He unlocked the door and entered. Dugan sat on the bed while Sybil stood in the center of the room. Her carefully groomed hair had come loose and she looked like a harridan.

“I’d like to kill you,” she cried.

He said, “I saw a mob last night that wanted to hang Dugan and your friend the sheriff. I’d hate to see them hang you, Sybil, but let me get this straight. Dugan was here to kill me when I came in. Then he was to join Upjohn somewhere. When he didn’t show up these two men who just left here were sent to see why he didn’t keep the appointment. If you try to follow them you’ll be followed. I suggest that you go on about your regular business.”

“What about me?” Dugan said wildly.

“Keep your nerve,” she said. “Dick Upjohn will be back and tear this town to pieces.”

“You’re going back to the jail, Dugan,” Paladin said. “You walked over here so you can walk back. Come on.”

The man had a limp but Paladin walked him back to the jail. The guard on duty was probably a friend of Upjohn’s, but he locked Dugan in a cell. Paladin found a boy and sent him in search of Jim Oakley. When he arrived Paladin briefed him on the events of the night.

“Just what do you want, Paladin?” Oakley asked.

“I saw Dugan murder a Chinaman in cold blood and I want him hanged for it. I don’t care about the rest, but I’ve got a suggestion. Get the honest men of the town together, kick Swartz out of office and appoint a new sheriff. Mob action will do no good, but you can clean up your town.”

“No jury would convict a man for killing a Chinaman.”

“Then the town deserves Upjohn and Swartz.”

“Paladin, I think you’re right,” Oakley said. “There are decent citizens here, and I’ll get busy right away.” He turned to the jailor and said, “If you let Dugan escape you’ll hang with him when he’s caught.”

Paladin had breakfast in a small restaurant, then went to Ah Kee's place, and this time he got in. An old, stooped Chinaman wearing a skullcap and pigtail let him in.

"You are Ah Kee?" Paladin asked. "I left my card last night."

"So you are the man my ill-favored nephew sent from San Francisco. Welcome to my humble house. Please step into my miserable living quarters." Before sweeping aside a curtain, Ah Kee locked his outer door.

The apartment was richly furnished with an expensive Oriental rug on the floor, and the furniture was of mahogany and teakwood. Brass incense burners hung in every corner of the room. The only Western furniture was a table and two chairs.

Ah Kee clapped his hands and a pretty Chinese girl in black pantaloons and an elaborately embroidered blouse entered the room with a low bow.

"My niece, Ming," Ah Kee said. "It is safer for her to be known as my slave." He said something to her in Chinese and she padded away to return in a few minutes with tea and delicate dishes. She gave Paladin a timid and somewhat flirtatious glance from her slanted eyes, served the tea, and hurried out.

"She is an attractive girl," Paladin said.

"She is not my mistress as you are thinking. She was left in my charge as a mere infant by an old friend. I have raised her as my niece and given her such education as my poor learning permitted."

"Since you are an Oxford graduate I should think her education would be adequate."

"My nephew, whom you call Hey Boy, talks too much."

"I have noticed the same thing myself. I am here to help you if I can. I saw one of your countrymen murdered yesterday."

"I know. He was foolish to take the stage. It has been impossible for any Chinese to leave Owyhee for a long time."

"And they burden you with the care of their gold?"

"Fortune sometimes puts tasks on our shoulders beyond our strength to bear."

"I would think it would put you in great personal danger."

"Perhaps, but no greater than my countrymen. They live in poor hovels and are beaten and robbed every day. The sheriff refuses to protect them. He has asked me many times to let him care for the gold, but until he knows where it is I am reasonably safe."

Paladin would not ask where the gold was hidden, but he thought the old man was vulnerable. Men like Upjohn and Dugan were not above torture, and he wondered how Ah Kee and Ming had escaped.

"How about this Bow Hong Dow?" he asked.

"It is my great danger. Two of them are here now, and if I do not give them the gold they threaten the lives of my kin in San Francisco. They have given me three days."

It was more serious than Paladin had thought. Even his friend Hey Boy was threatened. "How do you plan to get the gold out?" he asked.

Ah Kee drew back another curtain disclosing a large coffin. "Soon I must join my honorable ancestors. The sheriff has inspected this coffin many times, and knows that it is of lead. I have told him my ancient bones will be sent back to China in it, but they will go in another coffin which looks like this but is weighted with gold. I must trust Ming to take it back to San Francisco."

Paladin got the plan. Ah Kee expected to be killed by the tong hatchetmen. His body would be placed in the lead coffin, but would then be secretly exchanged for one loaded with gold. He was shocked, but he knew that Ah Kee was a fatalist.

"There must be a better way," he said. "How can Ming manage it alone?"

"I have a friend, Li Chen, who will help. I have changed as much of the gold as I dared into American currency, but there is still much gold. The coffins are identical."

"But suppose something happens to her?" Paladin protested.

"That is what I fear. I have given it much thought. Ming must have a white master for her own protection as well as to save the gold. I will give you a paper. She will serve you faithfully," Ah Kee said.

"Wait a minute," Paladin cried in alarm. "I will not be a slavemaster, nor a party to your death. There is a simpler way. There will be a new sheriff who will give you protection. Trust me and we will ride out on the stage together."

"To do a good deed at home is better than to go away and burn incense," Ah Kee smiled. "I will wait as long as possible, but Ming must know that if our plan fails she must look to you as her master."

He clapped his hands and Ming returned instantly. Paladin guessed that she had been listening behind the curtain. She gave him a worshipful look that he suspected was half coquettish.

Ah Kee said to her, "If I die Paladin will be your new master to keep you from becoming a slave to the Bow Hong Dow. You will serve him as you have served me."

Ming bowed low to Ah Kee, then to Paladin. "I am your humble slave, Master," she said.

"You are not my slave or my servant."

"Yes, Master."

Paladin said: "Ah Kee, there could be a riot here, and your place would be the first they would raid. There should be some place for you and Ming to hide."

"Was it not your Plato who said, 'For wherever a man's place is, whether the place he has chosen or that in which he has been placed by a commander, there he ought to remain in the hour of danger; he should not think of death or of anything but disgrace?'" Ah Kee said stoically.

"Whatever you wish," Paladin shrugged. "I'm sure you know as much as anybody about what goes on here, and I'd like to know."

For an hour Paladin listened while Ah Kee talked. The old man was a shrewd observer as well as a philosopher. He had known that both Upjohn and Swartz were scoundrels, and were responsible for the persecution of the Chinese. The Chinese, Ah Kee was sure, didn't have a real friend unless it was Sybil Sanderson. Some of them raised little gardens and Sybil had been their best customer. Sometimes she had been kind.

"Just what do you know about her?" Paladin asked.

"Only that her husband was hanged up in Oregon by vigilantes. It is not widely known."

"Maybe that accounts for a number of things," Paladin said.

Someone was pounding on the door and did not seem to intend to go away. Ah Kee excused himself and Paladin was left alone with Ming.

She said, "My uncle is a good man. He has been at enmity with some of the tongs in San Francisco. He came here because his people were here and he could serve them."

Paladin was about to say something but the sound of angry Chinese voices stopped him, and he saw Ming trembling with fright. "The Bow Hong Dow," she whispered fearfully.

"What are they saying?" he asked.

"That they will kill him unless I go with them," she whispered back.

Paladin opened the curtain enough to see into the other room. The two Chinamen were big men with fierce expressions. One of them had Ah Kee by the shirt and held a long, thin-bladed knife at his throat.

No words were necessary. The hatchetman saw death in the eyes of the man with the gun. He stepped back, said a single word to his companion, then both of them bolted for the door.

"Your presence here was most timely," Ah Kee said.

"It should show you that you must get rid of that gold, and you and Ming must leave this place. What were they going to do with her?"

"They'd have sold her to a woman called Eva Lang, but they would

have tried to make her tell what they want to know. You must take her away, Paladin.”

“I must take you both away.”

“It is good to be strong. I envy you.”

“Don’t. You kill one enemy and another springs up. Believe me, Ah Kee, I do not follow my occupation from love of killing.”

“My people have always followed the path of nonresistance. It is not your way, Paladin.”

“True. The path of resistance is not an easy one, but if someone didn’t do it we would all be victims of the ruthless. There’s a difference between the weak and the meek.”

“It was your Christ who said, ‘The meek shall inherit the earth.’ The only earth my people have here is what has been worked over by white men, and they are robbed of even that.”

“You are not a meek man, Ah Kee. You Chinese intellectuals are proud of your superiority over us barbarians.”

“There can be no superiority among equals.”

Paladin said: “I have an idea. Why can’t you put the body of the man who was killed into that coffin of yours and you and Ming take it to San Francisco? I’ll go with you if you wish.”

“My nephew was not mistaken as to your resources. I’ll try to arrange it,” Ah Kee said.

CHAPTER 13

Owyhee was seething with excitement, but Paladin was not greatly concerned about what happened to the town. It was not uncommon for boom towns to be taken over by outlaws, but their greed was usually their undoing. Sheriff Upjohn had fallen a victim of his own greed. Unless his vanity got the better of him he would leave while he could, but it was not to be depended on. That was a problem for the citizens.

Paladin took a ride around the camp. Suddenly he found himself riding along the creek where placer gold had first been found. Now it was being worked over by the Chinese. He saw them bending their backs, and they stopped to eye him suspiciously.

Where the creek widened out they had built their hovels along the bank, and some of them were raising gardens where they had diverted the stream for irrigation purposes. They were industrious where the white miners were wasteful, and it angered him that they were being exploited.

It was after noon when he returned, and a mass meeting was just breaking up. Jim Oakley saw Paladin and called him over. "I'm glad you came to town, Paladin," the man said. "Your advice was sound. It is better to act lawfully, and we have just reorganized the town board. We told Swartz he had to resign, and I'm the new mayor."

"Congratulations."

"We are going to have law and order in this town, and the first thing is to try Patsy Dugan for murder of that Chinaman. We'll need you for a witness."

"I had planned on leaving tomorrow."

"We need you. As a matter of fact we want you to be the new sheriff."

"I'm flattered, but I haven't the time. When are you going to have the trial?"

"It'll be in an hour. It won't take long. We want it over with before Upjohn can rally his cutthroats."

"Seems to me you are rushing it a bit. I've got to go to Blitzen in the morning, but I'll come back and testify if you'll put the trial off three days."

Oakley called some of his fellow officials together, and they agreed on a postponement. Then he told Paladin: "There's a lot of feeling

against the Chinks here, but I think we can get a jury to convict if you and Jim Hawkins and that girl Celeste will testify. Gooding, the stage driver, has already refused to admit that he saw anything."

"Sure I'll testify when I get back," Paladin promised. "Even a Chinaman has rights, and that was cold-blooded murder."

"Until we get a sheriff I'll take over the job," Oakley said.

"You'd better have some help. Upjohn may try to take Dugan out of jail."

"I don't think so. Sybil Sanderson was his girl, and she says she is sure he won't come back. It's tough on Sybil. She had no idea he was a crook."

Paladin went to see Jim Hawkins, who lived alone in a cabin. Hawkins said he was doing all right, and Sybil had just brought him some food.

"Quite a girl, Sybil," Paladin said. "She and Dugan tried to murder me last night."

"Sybil? I can't believe it! I know she was Upjohn's girl but she didn't know he was a crook, and she told me she was through with him."

"You don't look so good, Jim. You feeling all right?"

"Just a bellyache. Guess I ate more than I should."

Something was seriously wrong. Paladin believed that Hawkins had been poisoned, and he went to bring a doctor. When he found him the doctor was examining the body of the girl Celeste which some children had found out behind Eva Lang's Miner's Delight. Eva denied that she knew anything about the girl, and had no idea with whom she had been.

Paladin sent the doctor to see Hawkins, and then he looked up Oakley. There were three dependable witnesses against Dugan, and now one of them was dead, and another might be dying from poison. That left only Paladin.

"If they can't get me, and Hawkins lives they'll try to get Dugan out of jail," Paladin told Oakley.

"I'll be on the alert," the man promised.

Paladin returned to the Virginia Hotel. Sybil was behind the desk and she gave him a bitterly hostile look. "I want a private talk with you, Sybil," he said.

"I want nothing to do with you. Your room is occupied. You find some place else to stay," she said.

"I always hated to think of a woman being hanged, but you've got the rope practically around your neck."

"If you think you can scare me—"

“It won’t work, Sybil. When I tell them how you and Dugan tried to murder me, how you did have Celeste murdered, and how you tried to poison Jim Hawkins—”

She reached for a gun underneath the desk, but Paladin caught her wrist before she could touch it. The face he had once thought pleasant had all the malevolence of a tiger’s as she glared at him. “You would bully a woman,” she charged.

“When a woman resorts to murder she forfeits any consideration because of her sex. I’m taking you to the jail.”

“I’ve got friends. They’ll never let anything happen to me.”

“On the contrary, you will lead them to their death. A good-looking woman can make a fool of ’most any man. I understand that Sheriff Upjohn wasn’t a bad sort until he met you.”

“I didn’t make a fool of Upjohn—he was one to begin with,” she said with a sudden and surprising change of mood. “You wouldn’t have made the mistakes he did. You can take his place, and we’ll both have a fortune.” The tigerish look was gone and she was looking up at him, half pleading, half promising.

He said: “The Borgias have gone out of fashion, Sybil. If you had been up on your poisons Hawkins would have died instantly. Now there are two of us to testify against you. The town will hate you more for fooling them than for being the leader of an outlaw gang.”

“All right, I am the leader, but they don’t dare hang me. I know too much about too many respected citizens. They killed my husband, and I said I’d make them pay. If you hadn’t come along they’d have paid more. You’re a hired gunman. If you will get me and Patsy Dugan out of town I’ll pay you more than you ever thought of getting.”

“So Patsy, not Upjohn, was your man.”

“Ed Sanderson was my man. I used Upjohn, but I would have gone away with Patsy. I can leave him behind though. There is fifty thousand dollars in that safe, and half of it can be yours, Paladin,” she offered.

“You’ve made one mistake about me, Sybil. The servant is worthy of his hire, so I collect my fee; but I’m choosy about my cause. Yours is as evil and rotten as a cause can be. So there is no deal. If there’s anything you want to take to the jail I’ll let you collect it—under my eye.”

He went into her bedroom with her while she threw a few things into a bag, cursing him fluently all the while. It did not escape him when she put a small bottle into her bag.

People eyed them curiously as they walked toward the jail, Paladin carrying her bag. Oakley was there when they arrived.

"You can lock this woman up for attempted murder," Paladin said.

"He's got no evidence," Sybil cried.

Paladin said, "If you'll search this bag you'll find a bottle of poison in it, and the doctor will tell you that he pumped the same kind of poison out of Jim Hawkins' stomach. It's strychnine, I believe."

"That's a lie," she cried, "I only brought it along so I could kill myself if they try to hang me."

"As a matter of fact Sybil, not Upjohn, is the leader of the outlaw gang here."

"Is that true, Sybil?" Oakley asked feebly.

"You'll find out before morning," she said.

Oakley searched her bag and found the bottle of poison.

"If you'd let me keep the bottle you wouldn't have the trouble of hanging me," she said.

Oakley said, "If you'll tell us where Upjohn is, and where you have stashed the money it'll go a long ways toward getting you off."

"All right, I'll tell you, but you had better take a lot of men with you when you go after him."

"We'll do just that."

"Since Paladin will tell you anyway, unless he decides to take it for himself, the money is in my safe."

"All right, we'll impound the safe," Oakley said.

"And while you and your posse are out looking for Upjohn he'll be back here with enough men to take Sybil and Dugan out of jail, and get away with the fifty thousand dollars," Paladin said.

"He wouldn't be crazy enough to try that," Oakley said. "I'll handle this my own way."

" 'How is it possible to expect that mankind will take advice, when they will not so much as take a warning?' " Paladin said. "It is as true now as it was when old Jonathan Swift said it."

An hour later he saw Oakley riding away at the head of a posse of forty men. Wherever they were going he was sure it wasn't where Dick Upjohn was hiding.

It wasn't his concern how the citizens of Owyhee managed their affairs, and after dark he went to the Eureka saloon and got into a poker game.

There was an undercurrent of excitement, caused mostly because Sybil Sanderson was under arrest as the leader of the road agents. He learned that four men were guarding the jail while the posse was out after Upjohn. As the man who had turned Owyhee upside down,

Paladin was the object of curiosity and speculation. He played the game carefully, but kept himself alert, knowing there were still men in town anxious to gun him down.

A little past midnight a man rushed into the saloon yelling that Chinatown was on fire. Nobody in the saloon wanted to miss that excitement, for the terrified Chinamen would always be good for a laugh. They poured out of the saloon as fast as they could cash their chips, and some didn't wait for that. Paladin stuffed his winnings into his pocket, and hurried up the street to Ah Kee's. A raid on the pitiful quarters of the coolies would be a signal for someone to try to rob Ah Kee.

There was no light in the place, but he found the door unlocked. In the dark he stumbled over a human body. He struck a match and looked down at the murdered Ah Kee.

He yelled, "Ming!" but there was no answer.

Hastily lighting a lantern he went into the next room. The lead-weighted coffin was in its place, but in front of it was an excavation in a place that had been covered by the thick Oriental rug. The rug was thrown back, and he could see where a section had been so neatly fitted that it would never have been noticed. The hatchetmen had ripped up the whole rug and found the unfastened panel in the floor. The coffin that had been in the hole was gone.

It was not hard to figure what had happened. Ah Kee and Ming had been in the process of changing the coffins when they had been surprised by the hatchetmen who had probably worked for days finding a way to get in. They had killed Ah Kee, and taken Ming and the coffin containing the gold and the body of the dead Chinaman.

Paladin had offered his services, and he couldn't have forced them on a man like Ah Kee. By the warmth still in Ah Kee's thin body he judged that the tong men hadn't been gone more than an hour.

He went out on the street and could see the flames shooting up from the burning Chinese hovels, and he could hear the shouting and the excited, frightened cries of the plundered Chinese.

The Bow Hong Dow men wouldn't have gone in that direction, and they would have had their escape carefully planned. He ran down to the livery stable but found no one in attendance. Whoever had been on duty had gone to Chinatown to see the fun. Paladin had nothing to go on except intuition, and a measure of logic.

The tong men would have had a rig ready, and if they acted sensibly they would now be well along on their way to Blitzen. He found his own horse and saddled it hurriedly, and appropriated a rifle he found in the stable office. He had no doubt at all that the attack on Chinatown had had as its real object emptying the town so that

Upjohn and his men could raid the jail, but he had no time to worry about that now. He landed in the saddle and hit the trail to Blitzen.

His sole concern was for Ming. He feared that the hatchetmen would dispose of the body of the embalmed Chinaman and make Ming take his place. If she didn't die from suffocation and reached San Francisco alive she would be sold into slavery to some Chinaman, and Ah Kee had taught her too much for such a life to be endurable.

The weakness of the tong men was that they knew little of the country, or of horses. They might drive their hired team to exhaustion, and his one hope was to head them off before they reached the railroad.

He couldn't afford to show much mercy to his own horse. He passed by the place where the stage robbery had occurred, and shortly before the eastern rim of the mountains began to show a rosy color he was sure he could smell dust in the air. Daybreak revealed fresh wagon tracks, and now he forced his horse to the limit of its endurance.

The road ran over a low pass, and he sighted his quarry on the other side of a narrow valley. They were just starting up a stiff grade through the juniper trees. The wagon team was being whipped into a lumbering gallop, and Paladin doubted that the horses would make it to the next summit before they collapsed. They had a light spring wagon, commonly known as a democrat, and they were probably two miles ahead of him.

He rode down the other side as far as the junipers extended and paused to let his horse recover its wind. He rode on as soon as he was sure the hatchetmen could not look back and see him as he crossed the open valley.

When he gained the summit the wagon was no more than a quarter of a mile below. One of the Chinamen was standing up belaboring the exhausted team with a whip. He muttered, "Damned heathen Chineel!"

Then he saw one of the horses fall. The other animal turned to one side, and the wagon rolled over and over below the crude dugway. Paladin saw two blue-shirted Chinamen flying through the air as they jumped for their lives. The wagon came to rest at the bottom of the coulee, and the hatchetmen picked themselves up and ran down to where it lay.

Paladin spurred his horse to the point of a cedar-covered knoll above the coulee, and sprang to the ground with the rifle in his hand. The Chinamen were tearing at the lid of the coffin without much success, for they began searching for some kind of a tool. Paladin dropped a bullet at their feet, and from the way they jumped he judged they had been nicked by flying gravel. They bounded away down the coulee, shirts and pigtails flying in the breeze. He dropped

another bullet behind them, and then they disappeared in a wash.

Paladin got back on his horse and galloped recklessly down to the wagon. The coffin had fallen out of the wagon-box which had stopped on its side, but Ming was still spread-eagled in it. He jerked out his knife and cut her loose. She was badly bruised, but still conscious.

"My old master is dead," she said. "Now I serve you."

"Never mind that," he said. One of the horses had a broken leg and a bullet put it out of its misery.

"What's in the coffin?" he asked Ming.

"The gold of Ah Kee and the body of the man who was killed."

They were miles from water, and Ming needed a drink badly. First, she had to have rest, and he got the story of how she and Ah Kee had been surprised.

"It's lucky they didn't kill you," he said.

"It would have been better than what they planned," she said. "Soon they were going to leave the road, and make me take the place of the dead man. I heard them say they would gag me and bore small holes so that I could breathe. Ah Kee was a man of honor. The gold in the coffin must be delivered in San Francisco."

"It must be done," Paladin agreed. It meant that the gold must be hidden, for it would be a rich prize for anyone who happened along. He pried the lid off the coffin and lifted the dead man out. Under the false bottom there was considerable currency which he could take with him, but two heavy sacks of gold dust which would have to be left behind.

He lashed the sacks across his saddle, then lifted Ming up behind the saddle and led the horse back into the junipers. After half a mile he came to a gnarled cedar tree which had split in two, and one side was lying on the ground. He thrust the gold bags under the fallen part and covered them the best he could. It would be an accident if anyone ever found them.

He climbed into the saddle, and telling Ming to hang onto his belt started back to Owyhee. First, however, he resealed the coffin, and the way it had been jammed in the rollover would keep anyone from suspecting that it had ever been opened.

CHAPTER 14

The sensible thing would have been to go on to Blitzen, and get Ming back to San Francisco as quickly as possible, but there was a challenge in Owyhee that he had to meet. When he left the place he wanted them to remember that Paladin had been there.

He did not regard himself as a divinely appointed defender of the weak. In general, he thought the weak got what they deserved. The people of Owyhee had been preyed upon by outlaws, but freed of their fear they would be looking for someone weaker than themselves to put into bondage. None of them were so pure but what they would exploit the Chinese if they got an opportunity. Chinatown had been burned last night and he doubted that a single citizen had raised a hand to help the Chinamen.

It was an affront to Paladin's sense of justice and dignity. He would still fight the outlaws; not for the benefit of cowards, but to show the bullies their proper place in the scheme of things. If he had a private code this was as close to it as he could come.

Once he asked Ming if she wanted to stop and rest, and she answered, "It is for my master to say."

"Now look here, Ming," he said sternly, "if you don't want me to dump you off in the middle of this desert you stop calling me master. We don't have masters and slaves in this country."

"But men must have women," she said faintly.

"Granted. But they don't get them the way they get property. They marry them."

"Chinese girl make good wife. Maybe you marry Ming."

"A wise man once answered the question as to when a man should marry by saying, 'not yet.' A man who remembers that will stay free."

"Then Ming will serve you as her master."

"Call me Paladin, not Master."

"Yes, Master Paladin."

"Oh, the devil with it. The best way is for you to keep your mouth shut."

"I am sorry if I have displeased you. My only law is your wish," she said humbly.

They were nearly back to Owyhee when they met Jim Oakley with a posse. Paladin explained that he had been chasing a couple of Chinamen who had abducted Ming.

"Well, you had better not take her back to Owyhee," Oakley said. "Every building in Chinatown was burned last night and several Chinamen killed. The damned mob looted half the places in town. This girl might get rough treatment."

"She has had it, but nobody had better bother her again. What happened to your law-and-order government?"

"I don't know. While we were out looking for Upjohn he and his men slipped into town and set fire to the Chinese shacks and shot the poor devils when they ran out. When the townspeople took it over Upjohn raided the town. They took Sybil Sanderson and Patsy Dugan out of jail, and of course they emptied Sybil's safe. All I want is to get my hands on Upjohn and that woman," Oakley said bitterly.

"I'm afraid I can't be any help to you."

"They killed Swartz last night. It's plain anarchy. If you didn't see anything of them we'd as well go back."

"You go on; I'll take my time," Paladin said.

"I can see why," a man sniggered.

"It's lucky for you you're not worth a bullet," Paladin told him coldly. Oakley and his men galloped back toward town.

Paladin knew that Ming was suffering though she wouldn't complain. It was almost dark when they entered Owyhee. The first thing he noticed was that Ah Kee's place had been burned to the ground and it had been the old man's funeral pyre. Perhaps it was just as well. He could hear Ming's soft sobbing against his back.

There was no point in taking her to her frightened countrymen, even if there were any left in the camp. Ah Kee had committed her to his custody and he couldn't shirk the responsibility. He stopped in front of the Virginia Hotel and let her down. The Indian woman was in the office, and she said harshly, "Sybil gone. Place closed."

"It's open from now on," Paladin said. "We want two rooms and we want supper."

"You no boss me," the squaw said defiantly. "Me no wait on Chinese woman."

"So we have race prejudice even here. Get back in the kitchen and cook supper for us—and see that it's clean." Paladin glared at the woman, and suddenly her defiance crumbled. She fled into the kitchen as though expecting a boot in her rear at every step.

Paladin led Ming up the stairs to the room he had once occupied; then went back and brought towels and water for her to bathe.

"You washee first, Master Paladin," she said coyly.

"I'll washee later, but not here."

"You stay here. Ming will sleep on the floor," she said.

He said, "I quote another proverb of your people. 'A man cannot become perfect in a hundred years; but he may become corrupt in less than a day.' " He went out and closed the door.

Just to make sure there was no monkey business with the food he went into the kitchen and watched the Indian woman prepare the meal he had ordered. "What's your name?" he asked.

"They call me Aggie."

"All right, Aggie. The mayor hasn't got around to asking you where Sybil is, but he will. And if you don't tell they'll hang you, so you had better tell me," he said.

"Me no know," she said sullenly.

"Don't give me that. Sybil would have told you where she is going."

"How much you give me to tell?" Aggie demanded.

"You tell Jim Oakley and he'll pay you plenty of money. If you don't tell he'll hang you."

"Five hundred dolla," she said, and Paladin let it drop. After he and Ming had eaten he sent the girl back to her room and went in search of Oakley.

The man came back with him and talked to Aggie; finally agreeing to give her five hundred dollars if she would guide him to the place where the outlaws would be hiding. Oakley said they would start in the morning and requested that Paladin go along.

"I've done all I could," Paladin answered. "You may catch them and you may not, but it's up to you. I'm through with Owyhee."

He didn't resent the roughness of a mining town per se. He could sympathize with the prospectors who endured the hardships of the desert on the remote chance that they might make a strike. They were entitled to the fortune which they seldom got, or could hang onto. It was the parasites who came with the stampede like locusts in Egypt who reaped the benefits. The fault lay with the respectable people who were so blinded by greed and the hope of gold that they forgot the ways of civilization, and cared not who suffered so long as they got what they were after.

Owyhee had been in existence less than three years, and in another three it might be gone. A few murders and robberies didn't matter so long as the helpless were the victims. Owyhee was getting what it deserved. The only truly honorable man Paladin had met was Ah Kee—and he was dead. The sooner Paladin could get back to San Francisco with Ming the better.

He looked in on Ming before retiring to the room he had chosen. She had only the clothes she was wearing, but she had fixed her hair, and somehow managed to look seductive. He managed to duck out

before she got started with the master and mistress routine.

He was out on the street before Oakley and his party got started on their hunt for the outlaws. The stolid Aggie was mounted on a horse, and it was in Paladin's mind that Aggie only meant to delay the posse to give Sybil more time to get away, but it was none of his business.

"I'm sorry about Ah Kee," Oakley said. "I wish there was some way to recompense him."

"There isn't—unless you want to try to live up to the principles you claim to believe in, and see that other Chinamen who come here are protected," Paladin said.

"We'll do it," Oakley promised. "We let things go too long and they got out of hand. We're really not bad people, most of us."

"Nobody has appointed me your judge," Paladin admitted.

He hired a team and buggy and tied the horse he had got in Blitzen behind the rig and drove to the hotel. He awakened Ming, and when she came down with many apologies he had their breakfast ready. He assured her there was nothing they could do for Ah Kee and saw her mild almond eyes fill with tears. He handed her into the buggy and drove away from Owyhee without a backward glance. In a way his venture had been a failure, yet when he thought what would have happened to Ming had he not come, the trip was a success.

He drove at a moderate pace until they reached the place where the tong men had wrecked their wagon. He was relieved that Oakley had kept his word and sent someone out to get the body of the unfortunate Chinaman whom Dugan had killed. He drove the buggy a short distance from the road and left Ming there while he rode out and got the two sacks of gold. There was no sign that the hatchetmen had returned. He could only estimate how much gold and currency he had in his possession but he guessed that it was in excess of fifty thousand dollars. A fine prize for anyone who could get it.

It was late when they reached Blitzen. He got two rooms in a hotel and was relieved when Ming didn't insist that one room was enough.

He put the two bags of gold in the hotel safe and got a receipt, but kept the currency on his person. He turned in the rig and the three horses, paying the stableman to take the team and buggy back to Owyhee the next day. He ordered a meal for two and got a waiter to help him carry the food up to Ming's room. It was just as well, he thought, that not too many people knew of her presence in the town.

His own room was just across the hall, and he left the door slightly ajar. At times he could sleep like a cat, and he was sure no one could enter either room without waking him. He knew that Ming was terrified, and he reassured her the best he could.

He removed only his boots and slept very little indeed until nearly daybreak. He was awakened by the usual early morning noises of the hotel, and after he had washed and shaved he knocked lightly on Ming's door with the two long raps and three short ones which he had told her to expect, and she opened the door almost at once. Her apparent relief let him know that she had slept very little.

He took her down to breakfast and discovered that the morning stage had already left, but he had decided to wait another day anyway. Ming needed clothes and he took her shopping as soon as the stores opened. She was horrified at the idea of buying American clothes, so he found a Chinese store and took her there. The elderly proprietor spoke to her in Chinese, and Ming answered him modestly but volubly. The old man, she said, was a friend of Ah Kee's. He bowed low to Paladin and brought his finest in gaily embroidered blouses, slippers and pantaloons. Paladin guessed that she had told the proprietor that she was his slave mistress, and the man understood his wish to have her beautifully dressed. Paladin himself looked around the store and picked out a few accessories in the way of combs and bracelets that he thought she might like and paid the entire bill.

They were about to leave when Ming grasped Paladin's arm and pointed through the dingy window. "That is Li Chen, Ah Kee's friend," she said.

Paladin stepped out quickly and called to the man. For a moment he seemed minded to run, but came slowly back when he recognized Ming. He spoke little English, but Ming was an adequate interpreter. Li Chen was one of the survivors of the Owyhee holocaust and, she said, was Ah Kee's best friend.

The Chinaman paid a long, flowery tribute to Ah Kee, and expressed gratitude to Paladin for having saved the life of Ah Kee's niece.

"He says he knows I will be a faithful servant to you, Master," she finished the interpretation.

"You tell him that we have saved the money that was intrusted to Ah Kee, and that he is to come to my room to discuss it," Paladin said.

Half an hour later Li Chen and two other Chinamen came to the room with many low bows. Paladin explained to them that some of it was Ah Kee's private fortune, and so belonged to Ming. He told them they could divide it now, or he would undertake to get it all to San Francisco, and they could divide it there.

There was considerable debate among them, then Li Chen stated that they were agreeable to Paladin getting it to San Francisco. Li Chen, they said, would accompany him back and represent the others who had deposited money with Ah Kee.

The two hatchetmen had not been seen in Blitzen, and they could

have perished in the desert, though it was not likely. They would probably be heard from in San Francisco. It was apparent that Ming had no idea whatever of the value of money, yet she was morally if not legally Ah Kee's heir, and Paladin was her *de facto* guardian. He wanted her to have all her rights, while at the same time preserving Ah Kee's honor. He had counted the currency and it amounted to more than twenty thousand dollars. The gold was worth probably twice that much. A fair division, he thought, would be one third for Ming and two-thirds for the Chinese miners. He also had a personal claim on some of it.

He went out and bought two small trunks; one for the money, and the other for Ming. While she watched him he put the gold and currency into the iron-bound trunk and carried it over to the office of Wells Fargo, consigned it to San Francisco, and got his receipt. When the gold was weighed and the currency counted it amounted to sixty-five thousand dollars.

Relieved of responsibility of the money for the time being, Paladin devoted his attention to Ming, trying to impress on her the difference between slave and ward.

"If you must mention our relationship at all say that I'm your guardian, and that you are my ward. Never use those words master, slave, or mistress," he told her firmly.

"Yes, Master Paladin," she said humbly.

"Stop it."

"There is a difference," she said. "As your servant I have obligation to serve you. As your ward I have none."

"You don't need to serve me."

"Then I am nothing, and you are free from Ah Kee's wish," she said sadly.

"I am not free, and I will take care of you; at least until I can find friends who will take you in."

"I have no friends." She considered herself his slave, and had no one else in the world to depend on. She knew that if Paladin turned her adrift she could only disappear forever in the horrors of Chinatown where women were only chattels. Someone would claim her and she would be a slave in fact. She knew that Li Chen would not bother his head about her, and he was the only one of her countrymen she knew.

Paladin had to convince her that he was not going to abandon her to her fate, and he didn't know just how far he had committed himself in the process. Nor did he know what he was going to do with her when they reached their destination. He supposed that Inga Johansen would be at the Carlton, and what she would think didn't afford him

any great amusement.

They caught the stage the next morning, and Ming wasn't happy at having to sit with Li Chen, but she was child enough to thrill with excitement at all the new things she saw, and also Chinese enough not to let her emotions show.

They made connections with the westbound passenger train, and the next morning reached San Francisco. Paladin told Li Chen to come to the Carlton next day, and calling a cab drove with Ming to the hotel. Even though he had brought a very live problem with him, Paladin was glad to get back to the haunts of civilization.

CHAPTER 15

Paladin found the sight of Hey Boy standing in front of the Carlton restful to his eyes. Hey Boy gave Paladin a grin of welcome, then his slanted eyes opened as wide as a Chinaman's could ever do when he saw who was with him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Paladin," he said genially, but his gaze was directed at Ming.

Paladin said, "Hey Boy, this is Ming, the niece of your uncle Ah Kee, so she must be your cousin."

"I have many cousins, but none so nice like this one," Hey Boy said with unfeigned admiration. He bowed, and Ming bowed.

Paladin strode into the hotel and up to the desk with Ming tagging fearfully along behind him, and Hey Boy following with his arms loaded with luggage. The clerk eyed Ming with obvious disfavor.

Paladin had never given up his room, so he said, "I suppose my room is ready?"

"As always, Mr. Paladin," the clerk said.

"I want a room for my young friend here, next to mine, and I want a key to the connecting door."

"Yes, of course," the clerk said doubtfully, "but wouldn't she be more at home in Chinatown?"

"Either you give her a room, or I check out," Paladin said grimly.

"It will, of course, be only temporary?" the harassed clerk asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't know. Does she get the room or not?" There was a controlled savagery in Paladin's tone that made the clerk turn the register around hastily for Ming to sign.

"I'll do it," Paladin said, and in a bold hand he wrote the word, "Ming." The clerk handed him the keys which he passed on to Hey Boy, saying, "Now we follow you."

"Much pleasure," Hey Boy said. He would have stopped first at Paladin's door, but Paladin motioned him on. He had to urge Ming to enter. Hey Boy's manner had changed to one of disapproval or concern.

Paladin unlocked the connecting door, and said to the gaping Hey Boy, "Come on, put my bags in my room, unless you have suddenly turned stupid."

" 'A stupid son is better than a crafty daughter,' " Hey Boy

murmured.

"Spare me your Chinese proverbs on virtue, Hey Boy, but I'll quote you one: 'When you walk on snow you cannot hide your footprints.' I want you to look after Ming and see that she has everything she needs."

"There is a place in Chinatown—"

"She is not going there. I promised Ah Kee to look out for her."

"You saw my venerable uncle?"

"He is dead. I'll tell you about him in a minute." He turned to Ming. "This is your room. If you want anything ring this bell and Hey Boy will get it for you. Make yourself beautiful and I'll call you in an hour or so."

Paladin went into his own room and closed the door. "Wipe that look off your face, Hey Boy," he said. "Ming is not a yum-yum girl."

" 'The sense of shame is to a man of great importance. When one is ashamed of having been without shame, he will not afterward have occasion for shame,' " Hey Boy said.

"And Mencius also said, 'The virtues are not poured into us; they are natural; seek, and you will find them; neglect, and you will lose them.' Let there be no more talk here of shame or virtue," Paladin said.

" 'One flea cannot raise a coverlet,' " Hey Boy shrugged.

Hey Boy was no fool, and when Paladin told him what had happened he could appreciate the gravity of the situation. He said: "I know of the Bow Hong Dow. It is rumored in Chinatown that two of their hatchetmen have just returned from a long journey, and they are said to have sore feet."

"That is why Ming must not return to Chinatown. She must stay here, and you must see that she is not annoyed."

"Some day I must join my honorable ancestors. I will meet Ah Kee with a clear conscience."

"You'd better keep your conscience clear here and now or you may join him sooner than you think," Paladin said. "Is Miss Johansen still at this hotel?"

"She is still here. Every day she asks me if you have returned from the Sandwich Islands."

Paladin wrote a note: "Dear Inga: Will you have dinner with me and a friend at eight? Will meet you in the lobby. Paladin." He gave the note to Hey Boy to deliver.

He shaved and took a leisurely bath, and dressed painstakingly in the best clothes he owned. It was good to look and feel like a gentleman again. He needed a haircut, but that could wait until

morning. His hair was black and bushy and he habitually wore it stylishly long in keeping with his sideburns and mustache. Without being unduly vain he knew that it added to an imposing appearance where bluff was often one of the better tools of his trade.

He was indeed a fashion plate when he finally knocked on the connecting door. Ming opened it timidly, then stepped quickly back and almost touched the floor with her forehead. It was a mannerism he wished she didn't have, but she couldn't be changed; there were too many generations of bowing ancestors back of her.

"Please to enter this poor room," she murmured.

"Don't insult the hotel by saying this is a poor room," he said. "They are on the verge of throwing us out anyway."

"I do not understand."

"Let it go. Has Hey Boy served you well?"

"Yes, Master Paladin, he has been here three times to see if I wished anything."

"H-mm." Having gotten the virtuous proverbs out of his system, Hey Boy was probably human enough to appreciate Ming's charms. She was pretty much of a knockout, Paladin thought, though she perhaps used too much scented powder for Occidental tastes. She wore a yellow outfit he had bought for her in Blitzten, and though the blouse and pantaloons hung loosely they could not conceal her trim figure, and her rounded breasts bulged the brocaded jacket in a most attractive way. She wore small gold slippers, and her black hair was becomingly done up and fastened with the ivory combs he had given her.

"It is time to go down to the dining room," he said.

"I am afraid I will dishonor you with my miserable ways. Cannot I have Hey Boy bring food to my room?" she begged.

He was sure the minx knew how beautiful she was, and he said, "After tonight you can have him bring you as much as you wish, but tonight I want you with me."

"As you command, Master," she said humbly.

Thereupon he gave her a lesson as to how she should act, but a numb terror seemed to gradually settle over her. "Ah Kee taught me none of this," she almost whimpered.

"It'll be all right. You just be yourself—but don't call me master, and don't act so humble. Walk beside me; not follow me."

"Yes, Master Paladin. Ming try."

At the door he told her to take his arm and cling to it. They descended the marble stairs and turned into the ornate lobby that had been built by wealthy silver kings of Nevada whose ideas of spending

was to make a display.

"Walk tall," he whispered as he felt his slender companion shrink.

Inga was sitting in one of the big leather chairs in an evening gown of creamy lace, and she saw him at once. He saw her startled look at the sight of the Chinese girl on his arm, but she recovered quickly and came toward him with her hand extended and a somewhat fixed smile on her face.

"Paladin!" she exclaimed. "It's wonderful to see you again. And what a treasure you have brought back from the Sandwich Islands."

"You look radiant, Inga," he said. "A business deal caused me to change my destination."

"A destination you never intended to reach," she said, smiling. "You didn't fool me for a second."

"I doubted that I would. This is my ward, Ming. Ming, this is Miss Ingrid Johansen, an old friend."

"This humble slave is most honored," Ming said, bowing halfway to the floor.

"You are beautiful, my dear," Inga said. "Everyone is looking at you."

"A thousand pardons. I do not wish to be noticed."

"If you had come in wearing cotton you would still be the most beautiful woman in the room."

"Oh, no. Compared to you I am but a piece of coal beside a diamond," Ming murmured.

"Well, thank you, Ming, but I am sure Mr. Paladin would not agree with that," Inga said.

He said, "I will be honored to take the finest flowers of the Orient and the Occident in to dinner." He offered Inga his other arm.

"You said your ward?" she questioned softly.

"That is what I said, but Ming has an idea she is my slave because

—"
"Or your mistress?"

"Don't be catty, Inga," he said. "Her only relative, her uncle, a fine educated Chinese philosopher, was killed, and I promised to look out for Ming. I'll tell you the story later."

"I'm sure it'll be good," she purred.

Everyone seemed to be looking at them as they entered the dining room, and Paladin had to squeeze down on Ming's small hand and half drag her along.

The headwaiter knew Paladin and greeted him without turning a hair. "Your usual table, Mr. Paladin?" he asked.

“Yes, and my usual waiter.”

Another waiter bustled up to seat them and take their order. Paladin had to say, “Ming, don’t sit on the floor,” as she cringed away from the waiter.

The menu was in French and Paladin ordered what he thought Ming might like, with due regard that she was used to chopsticks and always had some difficulty with knives and forks. Both women had offered themselves to him, one without reservations, and they were in a sense on trial—not that he expected to take either one of them—but he was sure that with the intuition of their sex they understood that they were rivals.

Ming was at a disadvantage, but she looked so frail and delicate that by comparison Inga, whom he had thought the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, seemed somehow coarse and masculine.

Inga had gathered her resources, and was kind and helpful to Ming. She was far too wise to do otherwise if she wished to impress Paladin. She was adept enough at it that he was privately wondering if he couldn’t get her to take Ming under her wing, and relieve him of responsibility.

Ming ate very little in spite of Inga’s urging, and she contributed nothing to the conversation. Conscious of being stared at, she showed secret shame, and Paladin was sorry that he had subjected her to the ordeal. Inga, however, was enjoying the attention.

Without making excuses for having lied to her Paladin told Inga why he had gone to Nevada, and without dramatizing made her understand the ordeal Ming was going through.

“You poor kid, you need a woman to confide in, not a gunman,” Inga said bluntly.

“Master Paladin not gunman; he kind man,” Ming said with unexpected vehemence.

“Oh, I know,” Inga replied. “Very kind, very brave, and pretty much of a stinker.”

Paladin began to talk about the wine to cut off any rebuttal from Ming. Being something of a connoisseur he ordered the best champagne in the house and was relieved that Ming enjoyed the wine more than the food. Inga was emptying her glass faster than he liked, and he entertained a suspicion that she was trying to get Ming intoxicated. He changed his mind when it became evident that Inga only wanted to get drunk herself.

He would have ended the evening early except that men kept stopping at their table to speak to Inga; but while they talked to her their eyes were mostly on Ming. Under the influence of the

champagne Ming began to relax, and bowed and smiled naturally when anyone spoke directly to her. But she looked baffled when one man asked, "You have relatives here?"

"Her uncle was a Chinese diplomat," Paladin answered for her.

"That's what you should have been, Paladin," Inga said.

"I'm afraid Ming is tired, so if you don't mind, Inga—"

"Not at all. I'm tired myself."

The two girls walked on ahead while Paladin settled the bill, and he called Hey Boy over and said, "Hey Boy, you take Ming to her room. I think I'll smoke a cigar."

Ming looked bewildered. "You come soon?" she asked.

"Sounds quite domestic. Don't let me detain you," Inga said crisply.

"Don't bait your hook where there are no fish, Inga," Paladin said.

Hey Boy skillfully cut Ming away from the others and she followed him dutifully up the stairs. Paladin and Inga moved to a secluded place in the lobby, and Inga looked at him with a half smile while he lighted his cigar.

She said: "If Ming isn't your mistress she soon will be, and you think that will finish me off. I'm not so sure. I might get used to my husband having a mistress. Many wives have to, and Ming would keep out of the way."

"Maybe we're both drunk. I don't recall having proposed marriage to you."

"I guess it was the other way around, but it makes no difference. I think I could get you if I wanted you badly enough."

He was amused. "And now you're not sure that you do?"

"That's right, but don't congratulate yourself on your cleverness. If Ming were your mistress you wouldn't have brought her down here tonight. You did it only to get rid of me. If you knew women better you'd know that the harder a man tries to escape the more determined they are to get him. You foolishly tried to make me think the fish had been caught, and I know it hasn't." Inga softly patted the back of his hand. There was a bit of proprietorship in her touch.

"I had only hoped to rouse your altruistic instincts," he murmured.

"You have. I like Ming, and I could no more consider her a rival than I could a China doll, which she is. I'd like to take her shopping tomorrow. Will you let me?"

"Not only that, I'll beg you to. Ming is in real danger. That tong thinks I have the money they want, and they know I'd give it up if they got their hands on Ming. She would be much safer wearing American clothes. Maybe you can get her to wear them. I'm sure I

couldn't."

"We'll see what we can do. In the meantime I'll make up my mind whether to fight her for you or not. I come from a most stubborn breed."

"And I am no prize for any woman."

"Go and get me a pint of whiskey," she said. "The time will come when a woman can drink in a bar like a man; now she has to do it in the privacy of her own room."

He returned from the bar with the bottle she had requested and walked up to her room with her. He stepped into the room and opened the bottle and poured two drinks.

"Skoal!" she said, and they touched glasses.

When he set his glass down he found her in his arms, and could feel the throbbing of her bosom as he kissed her.

"Paladin, Paladin, why can't you be like other men?" she said with a sob in her voice.

"Good night, Inga," he said.

He was sure that he could hear Ming crying when he entered his room. Impulsively he put his hand on the knob of the connecting door, then drew back. Inga had been wrong. He was all too human; too much like other men.

He hadn't asked to get mixed up with the two most beautiful women in San Francisco. One of them was crying her heart out, and the other was getting drunk because of him. Either one of them, in her own way, could make a man happy. He could have them both, and a million dollars besides, he realized without vanity. Ming had bound herself to him out of a sense of duty and gratitude, and would give all she had unstintedly and would ask for no more than he wanted to give.

Behind Inga's love was a bit of cold calculation, and she was not a woman who held herself cheaply. She was far the more dangerous of the two. The only remedy he could see was to get out of San Francisco as quickly as possible. So he went to bed.

He luxuriated in the clean soft linen until eight o'clock the next morning, then rang for Hey Boy, who appeared more sleepy than usual.

"You've made a night of it in Chinatown, I gather," Paladin said.

"He who frequents the joss house sometimes shares other men's dreams," Hey Boy said.

"So?"

"It is known that you are here with the niece of Ah Kee."

"I was afraid of that. Bring us breakfast."

Paladin knocked on Ming's door and she opened it promptly. She was wearing blue pajamas, and she bowed low and waited for him to speak.

He said: "We will have breakfast in my room, but before we do you wash some of that powder off your face. This morning you'll go shopping with Inga and buy yourself some American clothes. I want you to put yourself completely in her hands."

"She is very nice, but don't American women object to concubines?" she asked softly.

"They do, but she is not my wife, and you are not my concubine. We are just friends."

"I would not stand in the way of your happiness, Master."

"If you don't stop acting so damned humble I swear I will sell you to the first Chinaman who makes me an offer," he vowed.

"Ming will do whatever you wish. Until then she is your servant."

Hey Boy arrived in half an hour with their breakfast, and on Ming's tray was food which he thought a Chinese girl might like, and there were chopsticks. She gave him a look of gratitude. Paladin thanked him, and he bowed himself out. It had occurred to Paladin that here might be a solution to his problem, but it wasn't a matter to be rushed. Besides, he understood that Hey Boy had his own girl.

After they had eaten he got an express wagon and had the trunk containing Ah Kee's wealth transferred from the Wells Fargo office to the Bank of San Francisco.

"Is this to be credited to your account, Mr. Paladin?" he was asked.

"Yes," he replied, "as guardian for one Ming Kee." There would be legal formalities, but no one was in a position to dispute his title. When the time came he would divide it between Ming and Li Chen. It was at least where the Bow Hong Dow couldn't lay their hands on it. When he returned to the hotel he saw a tall Chinaman watching him, so they knew where the money had gone.

He called on the detective agency, and talked to Mr. Ashworth the superintendent. He was told: "Captain Slater remained here only a couple of days then returned to the Panamacker mine. We bought a thousand shares of the stock in your name."

"Good. What else have you found out about him?"

"Very little, except that there was no Captain Slater in the Twelfth Iowa. We have traced him back to St. Louis but there the trail seems to end. He must have had a reason for changing his name there."

"I'm sure he did. Anything else?"

"Only that he hired some tough characters here to guard his mine. They were supplied him by a man named Norge."

"Did Norge go with him?"

"He is still here at the Hamilton Hotel."

"Keep an eye on him. If Breck Helm dropped out of sight in St. Louis and Captain Slater began his career there it could be the same man."

"We will keep working," Ashworth promised.

Paladin paid the man his fee and went back to the Carlton for his appointment with Li Chen. He had instructed Hey Boy to let the man into his room, but Li Chen wasn't there. Two other suave Chinamen were. They were dressed like Chinese merchants and greeted him with the usual bows and protestations of humility and unworthiness. He made a swift guess that they were members of the Bow Hong Dow.

"You are not the men I was expecting," he said bluntly.

"You mean an unworthy countryman of ours called Li Chen?"

"That's who I mean."

"Unfortunately detained. He has asked you to deliver to us certain money consigned to him by one Ah Kee, who regrettably has joined his honorable ancestors."

"And you, too, will be joining your dishonorable ancestors sooner than you think if any harm has come to Li Chen. The money will only be delivered to him in person," Paladin said.

" 'Whom heaven has endowed as a fool at his birth it is a waste of instruction to try to teach,' " the man said.

"Get out," Paladin said.

They withdrew, bowing and smirking in a way that caused Paladin to grab each man by the pigtail and administer a swift kick that sent them sprawling in the corridor.

He knew that he was by no means finished with the Bow Hong Dow. They had Li Chen, but it would never occur to them that he would surrender the money to save the life of a mere coolie, but he was vulnerable through Ming.

He had learned from Hey Boy that Inga had taken Ming shopping hours before, and he waited as patiently as he could for their return. When the girls got out of a cab he was quite sure neither of them would be taken for a Chinese girl at a distance.

Inga had done wonders in transforming a Chinese girl into an American one. Ming wore a blue dress, high-heeled shoes and a fashionable hat. Her black hair was worn in the same style as Inga's own. Ming had lost her shuffle, and seemingly was not bothered by the unaccustomed shoes.

He waited for them to come over to him where he would not be seen talking with them from the street. Ming's eyes were shining with pleasure. "How do I look, Master Paladin?" she asked.

"You look fine," he said heartily. "Inga, you took out a doll and brought back a woman."

"Wait till you see her in one of the evening gowns I got for her. I did some shopping on my own account too. I see now that I've got to meet competition," Inga laughed.

"You run up to your room, Ming, I've got to talk to Inga," Paladin said.

She started to bow, but Inga said: "No more of that. We make men bow to us." Ming smiled and moved off up the stairs.

"She learned quickly," he said.

"You know, I should hate her, but I don't. I like her."

"So do I, but I'm worried about her and I need your help." He told her about the visit of the tong men.

"Why, that's out-and-out blackmail and robbery. Why don't you have the law on them?" she demanded.

"Chinatown is pretty much of a law unto itself. When a person disappears there the police know better than to try to find them. If the Bow Hong Dow ever got Ming down there nobody would ever see her again. I doubt if even Ah Kee's money could get her back."

"Then we mustn't let them get her. Will you trust her with me?"

"I already have, but these people are clever. Sooner or later they'll discover her, and you might be in as much danger as she is. White girls have disappeared in Chinatown before."

"Women are at a terrible disadvantage," she said. "First you threaten me with a savage Indian, and now with some Chinese vice lord, but I think my paladin would come after me."

"I'd come after you," he said.

"I think both Ming and I would be safer back on the Potlatch. Do you think you could trust her with me?"

"Are you serious?" he demanded.

"Of course. Eric wants me to come home, and I think he finally needs me. So, I've decided to go home, and I would like to take Ming with me."

"Certainly nothing would please me better," he said earnestly. He felt ashamed of the thought that this would be a good way to get both girls off his back.

Inga didn't let him gloat very long, as she said: "Then when you have finished this job you've set yourself you can come to Idaho and

choose between us. But you can't have us both." He wasn't quite sure whether she was joking as much as her tone implied.

He answered: "I'll come back, but not to choose a woman. Against one the odds are great enough, but against two—"

"For a slayer of dragons, my friend, you may be brave enough, but in affairs of the heart you are singularly timid. But we shall see. The daughter of a Viking doesn't give up easily."

At the desk he was handed a letter from some man in Texas who had come into possession of one of his cards. It carried an offer of two thousand dollars for his services. He filed it away for future reference. His immediate task was to get Inga and Ming safely on their journey, then see about Li Chen.

Hey Boy had a cousin called Charley who, Hey Boy assured him, could find anybody in Chinatown, and Charley was searching.

Getting the girls on the boat unseen was a more immediate problem. It would have been better not to be seen with them, but he had a profound dislike of having his freedom of movement curtailed. He met them in the dining room of the Carlton, and was sure that Inga pinched Ming to keep her from genuflecting before him. He moved proudly with them to a table.

Ming wore a green evening dress as regally as though she were the wife of a Chinese mandarin. Only her slanted almond eyes and her low voice betrayed her Oriental origin. She looked at Paladin beseechingly, but he told her firmly that she must go with Inga for her own safety and his.

"I'll see you just as soon as I can," he promised. She was well enough trained not to argue with her master.

After dinner he bade them a casual good night and went in search of a poker game. Shortly after midnight he left the game and met the two girls at a side entrance. Hey Boy had a cab waiting in the alley, and they drove to the Embarcadero. He was sure that their departure had not been noticed.

He took them on board their steamship and down to their stateroom. He remained with them about ten minutes, and when he left Inga kissed him goodbye. Not to be partial he touched Ming's cheek lightly with his lips. She was frightened, but had resigned herself to the inevitable, and would not betray her emotions.

"You do exactly as Inga tells you," he admonished, "and I'll see you both as soon as I can manage it."

"Yes, Master," she said humbly.

"Yes, Master," Inga repeated mockingly.

"Women like you need a master," he said. "Somebody that will slap

you down every so often.”

She replied, “He must be such a man as Antony said Brutus was:

‘His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, This was a man.’ ”

“Don’t expect gentleness from me,” he told her.

He had a talk with the mate on duty and a bill changed hands. The mate assured him that the stateroom would be well guarded.

The wharf was dark when he left the ship, but he could see his cab still waiting. He was almost to it when he saw two Chinamen step from behind it. He reached for his gun, but those two had been a decoy. He just had time to sense someone behind him when something struck him a terrific blow on the back of his head, and he sank into a wave of blackness.

CHAPTER 16

It was the offense to his nostrils which first brought Paladin back to consciousness. There was a conglomeration of odors, but the sickly sweet one of opium predominated. The word Chinatown drifted through his befuddled mind, and set off a chain reaction of memories which quickly brought him back to the steamboat, and the assault on him after he left the boat.

He lay perfectly still until things knit together in his mind, but there was nothing to be satisfied about. He had been captured by the Bow Hong Dow, and there was no more merciless tong in the city. He opened his eyes slowly. There was a dim light somewhere, seen only through a blue haze.

He found himself lying on a straw mat in a narrow bunk. There was a solid wall back of him, and a six-inch board at the front of the bunk to keep the occupant from tumbling out on the floor. He listened and could hear the breathing of other men; one directly above him. He knew where he was now, and his head was more or less clear though it ached with a thousand furies. He had no doubt that he was being watched so he moved his limbs carefully, one at a time; convincing himself that he was not bound.

His gun belt had been taken from him, of course, and so was the knife he had worn between his shoulders just in case of an emergency, but his hopes got a mighty lift when he discovered that the carefully hidden derringer up his sleeve was still there. That apparently was a trick with which the hatchetmen were not familiar.

His first concern was for the two girls, but he held fast to a belief that they were safe. Even Chinese criminals would hardly dare try to kidnap anyone off an American vessel in an American harbor. And if the tong had been sure of them it would have tried to stop the cab before it reached the wharf. They would know that they couldn't get the money from the bank except on his order, so they would have to let him live until they got it. He would soon know what manner of extortion they would practice.

He didn't have long to wait, though his head hurt abominably, and it was torture not to move. The same two Chinamen who had visited him at the Carlton came up now, and they had forgotten their florid manners.

"Son of a dog, where is the money?" one demanded.

"If you don't know, why should I tell you?" he retorted.

"We know you put it in the bank, and you will give us an order for it."

" 'When the ear will not listen the heart escapes sorrow,' " he said.

"If the ear does not listen the heart will be cut out," the Chinaman said. "Look at the cringing dog there who will soon be begging you to give us the money while there is still a tongue in his mouth."

Paladin raised up on one elbow. He saw Li Chen bound and helpless between the two brutal hatchetmen who had murdered Ah Kee.

"I do not know him," Paladin said.

"Yet you rode with him from Blitzen to San Francisco. We do not think you will enjoy watching them cut out his tongue. If that does not convince you to write a check for the sixty-five thousand dollars you deposited in the bank perhaps the sight of the same thing being done to the girl Ming and her white companion will convince you," the man said smoothly.

He could be lying; Paladin thought he was. He said, "Produce them, and you will get the money as soon as I know they and Li Chen are safe."

"So now you remember Li Chen. Give us the check and we will let the dog live. If not we will cut out his tongue, then those of the two women, and then if necessary your own. But there will be some refinements."

"Show me the women."

"We do not deal. Give us the order or that dog loses his tongue," the man said arrogantly.

They did not have the girls. Little as the Chinese valued women they would have known that it would be easier to weaken an American by forcing him to witness the torture of a woman. If the tong had them it would have produced them.

Paladin said, "It is my life and Li Chen's I am buying."

"We could have them with two blows of a hatchet."

"Very well. But it wouldn't get you the money. You have the women so to save them I will give you the check. But only at the bank, and Li Chen must go with me," Paladin bargained.

They talked for a moment in Chinese, then the man in command pointed at Li Chen and he was quickly released. "Write the check," the man said, his eyes glinting wickedly. "Write it to Li Chen, and we will go to the bank with him to see that he gets back safely. Unless you do you will never leave this place alive."

They had no intention of letting him live. They knew that they had run their best bluff, and all they could hope to get was his check. With it in their hands they might get the money some time after Paladin

and Li Chen were dead, and they dared not let either of them live. The second Chinaman thrust Paladin's checkbook and a pen toward him.

It was down to cases now, a plain matter of life and death so far as Paladin was concerned, and the odds were four to one. They were all big men, far different from the coolies like Li Chen. He swung his legs over the bunkboard and reached for the checkbook which the grinning Chinaman was extending toward him, but instead of taking it he aimed a kick at the Chinaman's groin which doubled the fellow over in agony.

Paladin landed on his feet and hooked his left to the other Chinaman's jaw, as the derringer dropped into the palm of his right hand. The other two were rushing him, long knives flashing. A .41 slug caught one between the eyes; the other slug struck his partner in the chest. At a distance of ten feet the derringer was a lethal weapon.

Thank you, Mr. Remington, Paladin thought. Without that extra barrel one of the hatchetmen would have reached him with a knife. The last man he had shot lunged forward in dying frenzy, slashing at Paladin with the knife, the blade ripping a gash in Paladin's shoulder as he leaped aside. The dying man fell forward into the bunk, but there were still two of them to deal with, and they were getting to their feet.

Paladin saw Li Chen pounce like a cat on the knife the first dead Chinaman had dropped. Paladin hurled the derringer at the face of the leader and the man fell. But the man he had kicked was driving his knife at Paladin's back. He felt the blade enter, but somehow it had lost most of its force, as Li Chen disembowelled the hatchetman with the knife he had retrieved.

Two were dead, another dying, and it took only a minute to put the leader out of commission with a kick to the jaw, and then bind him head and foot. Half a dozen Chinamen with opium-deadened minds had raised up in their bunks to watch, but they presented no menace.

Paladin quickly found his gun belt with the .45 still in it, and hastily reloaded his derringer. Everything depended on whether Li Chen could find a way out, but Li Chen indicated that he could not.

"Try it anyway," Paladin said, and they ran out into a narrow corridor. The passageway turned abruptly to the left, and they found themselves in another opium den. Paladin caught a Chinaman by the pigtail and thrust his gun against the man's stomach. He pointed upward with his thumb, and again at his prisoner. Li Chen caught the idea and jabbered at the man in Chinese, making signs that let him know his life depended on him acting as their guide.

A dozen chattering Chinamen looked as if they might make trouble but a bullet from the .45 shattered the lantern, and they dived for

such shelter as the place afforded.

Li Chen was doing nobly. He kept up a running chatter of conversation, and such Chinamen as they encountered in the winding, twisting passageways seemed to think that he was a paid guide showing Paladin the sights. Paladin himself kept his gun against the back of their real guide.

They were out of the maze at last, and in a place of business of some kind that opened into the street. Paladin let his prisoner go and the fellow scurried back the way he had come. Paladin and Li Chen walked out into the narrow street, and some of Li Chen's meager English came back to him.

"We walkeee slow. Hatchetmen velly mad. Plenty flightened. Me, too."

They found a policeman who told Paladin where he could catch a cab, and by eight o'clock they were back at the Carlton being greeted by Hey Boy.

"You not come back; I think you join honorable ancestors," he said.

"Find Li Chen a place in the servants' quarters, and then bring some breakfast up to my room," Paladin directed.

While he was eating he sent Hey Boy out for a doctor. Neither of his two wounds were particularly serious, though in both cases it had been close, and the doctor urged him to stay in bed. Once the wounds were treated and bandaged he felt only a normal amount of discomfort, and as soon as the doctor left he took a cab to the office of the steamship company and was told that the *Monterey* had sailed on schedule with all passengers aboard and accounted for. His mind thus lightened he called at the police station to report the attempt on his life by the Bow Hong Dow.

"We know these people," the chief said. "It's only a small but dirty criminal organization, hated by most of the other tongs. We'll keep an eye on them."

Paladin spent the next two days at work he didn't like, but which had to be taken care of. He consulted bankers and people who knew the Chinese, and finally was able to set up a sort of a trust fund for Li Chen and his fellows from Owyhee with a reliable Chinese firm. He left one-third of the entire amount in trust for Ming with the Bank of San Francisco.

It was only when Hey Boy reminded him that he remembered that he hadn't collected his own fee. "You no worry. Ming is your slave girl. She give you everything," Hey Boy said.

Paladin knew that she would if he asked it, but this he had no

intention of doing. For this one time at least he would do a good deed without being paid for it.

The death of the Bow Hong Dow men had not been reported to the police, and Paladin considered that matter settled. They might try to exact personal vengeance upon him, but they would know that getting any of Ah Kee's money was out of the question. Ming would be safe from them, for they would not believe that anyone would place any special value on the life of a slave girl. But he did not feel entirely relieved until he received a wire from Inga at Portland, saying they had arrived safely and were leaving at once for the Potlatch.

His wounds were healing nicely, but he needed time to recuperate, and he was enjoying an unusually lucky streak at poker. He was still considering the request from the man in Texas, and another man in Colorado had come up with an equally lucrative offer, but he was in no hurry to accept either one.

He was in business, with only his card for capital, and if he didn't get rich at it it was still an easy living—for as long as he lived. It would bring him the tang of adventure for which he had acquired a taste not unlike that of an alcoholic for liquor.

Meantime, he was recuperating and enjoying life. Ashworth of the detective agency informed him that his agents in the East had finally dug up a death certificate for Breckenridge Helm. The man had apparently died after Captain Slater had left St. Louis which meant that they could not have been the same man. This automatically ended his long search for vengeance, and he was at liberty to direct his course into any channel he chose.

The sensible thing to do was go back to the Potlatch and marry Inga Johansen. She was a beautiful and intelligent woman who would be an adequate mate for any man. He could step into her father's business and become a man of wealth and affairs. He knew he would be a fool to turn it down, and yet it meant accepting a domesticity for which he had no real bent.

He had become accustomed to killing, though he got no personal satisfaction out of it, but the world was full of brutality and injustice, and he was a paladin at heart. If he married Inga he wondered how long it would be before he left her to exercise the only trade at which he was a master. The excitement of matrimony would wear off, but the excitement of danger never would. He sensed that he would have to choose one path or the other, and he was not yet ready to make the final decision.

Three pleasurable weeks passed, and he was not yet able to make up his mind. His wounds had healed, and he felt a hunger for the trail, while his woman hunger grew less in spite of a letter from Inga which

painted a rosy picture of life in the timber. She assured him of her undying affection. Ming, she wrote, was still eagerly awaiting his arrival.

Ming was another problem he had to face. He was her moral if not her legal guardian, and he couldn't free himself of that responsibility. He even consulted an attorney as to what steps he might take to make their relationship legal. She would gladly become his concubine and it was too bad, he thought wryly, that Inga wouldn't accept that arrangement.

He wrote Inga a letter, a strictly noncommittal one which contained only one reference to affairs of the heart.

"It is too bad, my love, that you are not a Mormon, for over in Utah they are still practicing polygamy. If you and Ming would both marry me I'd have the start of a magnificent harem." He told her he was thinking of going to Texas.

The letter had scarcely left the post office when he received one from Pioche, Nevada, which immediately changed his plans. The letter read:

Dear Mr. Paladin:

I have seen your card, and I am desperately in need of your help. I am a helpless, defenseless woman who is being persecuted by unscrupulous men. My late husband discovered a rich mine called the Panamacker of which you may have heard. My husband died, and a certain Captain Slater is trying to beat me out of it, and will do so unless I can find a fearless man like yourself to champion my cause.

If you can get my mine back for me I will pay you whatever you think is right. I am enclosing a hundred dollars to pay your expenses down here.

Register at the Meadow Valley Hotel under your own name and I will get in touch with you. I shall show you one of your cards to identify myself.

Sincerely yours, Mrs. Ida Mayberry.

Paladin pocketed the letter and said aloud, "Mrs. Mayberry, you have just hired yourself a boy."

If Breck Helm was dead then he could not be Captain Slater, but Paladin still had a score to settle with that gentleman. Slater had tried to have the ex-Quantrill guerrilla, Hillary Hatcher, murder him, and nothing appealed to Paladin more than trying conclusions with both of them. Besides, he had invested a thousand dollars in the Panamacker mine, and he had to protect his investment.

If Slater was trying to rob a widow that simply added more incentive to see what it was all about. He packed his bags and headed for Pioche, Nevada.

CHAPTER 17

Paladin got off the Hamilton & Pioche stage late in the afternoon and registered at the Meadow Valley Hotel as directed. It was a three-story structure with as much luxury as could be found in San Francisco; a pleasant surprise for Paladin. Its lobby was large, with a huge ornamental chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling, with smaller ones in other places. The lobby chairs were deep and comfortable and upholstered in leather. He could see an elaborate bar with gambling paraphernalia in the rear, and through open folding doors in another direction he could see the dining room with the tables covered by immaculate white linen.

Pioche was a solid looking town in spite of its newness, utterly unlike such places as Owyhee or Blitzen, and gave every indication of permanence. Paladin found that his room was everything that he could desire, and he was glad that he had brought along his best clothes. He bathed, shaved, changed into his gray suit and flowered vest, ruffled shirt and wide cravat, and went down to look things over.

He ordered a drink and asked the bartender, "Just where is the Panamacker mine?"

The bartender replied, "I suppose you're one of the new stockholders that come flocking in here every day. They all act surprised to learn that the mine is more than forty miles out over one of the roughest roads a man ever traveled."

"I am surprised. They have offices here in Pioche I trust."

"Not unless you call Captain Slater's room in the hotel an office, but I haven't seen him in town for a week."

"You wouldn't by any chance know a widow by the name of Ida Mayberry?"

"Not personally, but I've heard of her. She and her husband owned quite a horse ranch down in Paradox Valley, but her husband got killed a few months ago, and I heard that she sold the ranch to a man named Hatcher and left the country."

"What killed her husband?"

"Lead poisoning—a common complaint in this country."

So the remnants of the Quantrill gang were still operating, and it tied in with Captain Slater.

"Is the Panamacker mine anywhere near this Paradox Valley?" Paladin asked.

“About halfway between here and there I understand. Don’t know the country myself.”

Paladin stopped at the desk to inquire about Mrs. Mayberry and elicited much the same answer, but the clerk added: “She stopped here maybe a month ago on her way out of the country. She claimed she had been robbed, and looked pretty dejected and helpless, but I haven’t seen her since.”

Paladin didn’t like what he heard, but he ordered a good supper and enjoyed it. If Mrs. Mayberry needed his services she should have been at the hotel, yet there was a possibility that she was frightened for her life. Her letter hadn’t sounded as though she were a timid woman. He could only wait.

After he had eaten he went back to the gambling room in search of a poker game, but he was attracted to a blackjack game operated by a green-eyed, red-headed attractive young woman. She was almost the only woman in the place, and her occupation was unusual enough to arouse his interest. He went over and placed a bet.

“Stranger here, aren’t you?” she asked. Her voice was low and pleasant, neither friendly nor unfriendly, but there was a controlled wariness in her green eyes. She was dressed modestly and becomingly, even though her gown was cut as low as modesty would allow. She wasn’t a raving beauty and her features were strong rather than pretty. In any other place he might have described her appearance as wholesome.

He nodded. “Name’s Paladin.”

“Nellie Post. Welcome to Pioche.”

“Nice town you have here.”

“If you don’t mind the people. They’re rough on tenderfeet.”

“Do I look like one?” he smiled.

“You sort of puzzle me. I’d say you were one—or a professional gambler.”

A rough-looking character said impatiently, “Make your bet, stranger, or get out of the way. Come on, Nellie, deal the cards.”

“Go to hell, Hayes,” she said curtly. “If I feel like talking to a customer I’ll talk.”

“Must be a horse thief to rate all that attention from you, but I don’t stand back for no dude,” the man said, and dug an elbow viciously into Paladin’s ribs.

Paladin’s temper flared, but he said quietly enough, “You made a mistake, Mister.” He caught the fellow by the collar and twisted him around. Before the man could draw the gun his hand was reaching for, Paladin knocked him halfway across the room. He caught at another

man to save himself, and dragged the bystander down with him. Paladin watched as the man got shakily to his feet with a little voluntary assistance.

"I'll see you hanged, Nellie," the fellow said. "You and this dude along with you mebbe."

"Go on back to Paradox Valley and tell Hillary Hatcher to try it," Miss Post said. "I'll give you ten seconds to get out of here." A blunt-nosed revolver appeared in her hand, and the fellow beat her time limit.

More amused than concerned, though he was interested in her mention of Hillary Hatcher, Paladin said, "You look like a lady who could take care of herself."

"I've done all right so far. Do you want to play blackjack?"

"I'd rather talk. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Ladies are not allowed at the bar, but we could have a drink in the dining room."

"My pleasure," he said.

Nellie called a man to take her table and they moved into the nearly empty dining room. Paladin looked over the wine list and ordered what he thought would please her.

"You know your wine, friend. Order what you want, but I'll have a beer."

"Cancel the wine and bring us two beers," he told the waiter. "Now what is this about you being a horse thief, Miss Post?"

"Just call me Nellie—everybody else does—but don't add the horse thief until you know me better," she warned.

"I assure you, I have no such intention. Besides, I heard you mention unfavorably a man I happen to dislike, one Hillary Hatcher."

She said pensively: "Hillary Hatcher is the biggest horse thief in Nevada though he poses as a respectable rancher. I have a friend who was doing all right with a small ranch down in Paradox till Hatcher brought in a bunch of gunmen and run everybody out. My friend wouldn't take it lying down like the rest of them and he's been stealing his own horses back. If that makes Jesse a rustler then he is one, and so am I."

"Did you say Jesse? What's his last name? It wouldn't by any chance be Warner, would it?"

She said heatedly: "I thought you said you were a stranger. Now my guess is you're a range detective Hatcher has hired, and you are pretty damned sneaky at it."

She started to get up, but Paladin implored her to stay. He said: "A man named Jesse Warner saved my life once. I know it's a slim chance

but if your friend is the same man I want to help him. I've been hearing a lot about this Paradox Valley. This is what brought me here." He handed her the letter from Ida Mayberry.

Nellie read the letter twice with steadily darkening brows. She said: "This may be on the level, but I don't think so. There was no fight in Mrs. Mayberry, and the only thing she could think of when she left here was to get back East and forget everything that happened."

"You don't know if this is her handwriting then?"

"No, I don't, but I know who would. It's an old lady down in Paradox who runs the post office and a one-horse store in Sulphurette, the closest thing to a town there is in the valley. About that card of yours, what's so unusual about it?"

"Nothing much." He handed her a card, and her green eyes lighted with interest.

"You're the kind of man Slater and Hatcher could use," she said.

It seemed quite necessary to Paladin to get this girl on his side, even if it meant explaining more than he liked.

"Hatcher tried to kill me once—I think on Slater's orders. Hatcher was one of Quantrill's men and I had trouble with them. That was after this Jesse Warner I spoke of saved me from being shot as a spy."

"I'm almost inclined to trust you, Paladin."

He said, "If you are right and this letter is bogus, who do you think wrote it? I'm sure it was a woman."

"It wasn't the kind Hatcher hangs out with, and Slater has a new woman every month. Would you like to see a sample of my handwriting?"

"It's not necessary," he smiled. "But I'm going down to Paradox Valley to see the postmistress of Sulphurette. What is her name?"

"Babe Calloway. She was a sporting girl years ago and makes no bones about it. But if Hatcher is after you they'll stop you before you get to Sulphurette. You made an enemy of Chick Hayes, and he is Hatcher's man. His business here is to watch me to see if they can't use me to catch Jesse Warner. Hatcher has sworn he will hang us both. What happened here this evening is enough for them to hang you, too, if they catch you out alone."

"I have an idea this letter was a hoax to get me down there. If so, I mustn't disappoint them. Do you know where I could find a reliable guide?"

Nellie pondered the question a moment before she answered, "I do. Me."

"There is nobody I'd be more willing to share a rope with if we must hang, but that would be asking too much."

"I'm serious," she said. "I've been thinking of going down there anyway because Babe is the only one who can tell me where Jesse is. But if we're caught you'll be hanged just for associating with me."

"I'll take the chance if you want to take it."

"All right, but it'll be a long, hard ride. I have my own horse, a good one. If you'll hire one for yourself I'll arrange for a pack outfit and meet you at the livery stable at four o'clock in the morning."

"I'll be at the livery stable," he promised.

He was embarking on a bizarre adventure, but he was a gambler who believed in hunches, and his hunch was that Nellie Post was on the level. If she was he would need her; if she wasn't he could take care of himself.

Pioche's boom was in full bloom. It was already claiming ten thousand people, and boasting that it would soon outdo the famed Washoe whose silver millions were pouring into San Francisco in a steady stream. New people were arriving every day, and Paladin could easily sort out the honest miners from the jackals who followed every new mining strike.

There were plenty of these predators, from swaggering gunmen to cheap tinhorns, and they were having more trouble sizing him up than he had with them. He didn't quite fit into any category they knew. Others were not anxious to make the mistake Chick Hayes had made.

He spent the evening looking over the saloons, and finally wandered back to the hotel. Nellie Post was still on duty. She ignored his presence, and he kept away from her table though he kept an eye on her.

Once he saw a man place a caressing hand on her shoulder, and the next moment the fellow recoiled as the palm of her hand landed hard on his cheek.

A man playing poker with Paladin laughed. "Some of these bums think Nellie must be a loose woman because she deals twenty-one, but they learn—and how fast they learn."

"Man-hater I take it," Paladin drawled.

"I wouldn't say that. The talk is she's got a horse-thief sweetheart, but he never shows up here. If he did they'd hang him."

By ten o'clock the place was getting boisterous, even though the management was trying to run a more orderly place than the saloons. It was the kind of life Paladin loved, and he tingled with the excitement. Then he missed Nellie Post, and recalled that they had an early date. He cashed in his chips and went to bed.

He was up early, put on his usual black working clothes and went out

for breakfast at an all-night restaurant. He was at the livery stable before four o'clock, but Nellie Post was there ahead of him, talking to a long-legged, sleepy-looking hostler. She was attired in cowboy garb, and would have looked like a slim young boy except for the twin ropes of red hair she had coiled around the back of her head low enough not to loosen her wide-brimmed gray hat.

"Turtle has got our horses ready," Nellie said. "If anyone asks, Turtle, you tell them I've gone out to Tucker's ranch with a horse buyer."

"Sure will," the man grinned. He led out three horses, one packed with a camp outfit. Nellie's horse was a handsome roan gelding, and Paladin had no complaint about his own bay.

"So now I'm a horse buyer," he said, when they rode away. "I would say that you certainly know your horses."

"I've been practically raised on a horse," she admitted.

"I'm still afraid I'm imposing on you."

"I'm not going just because I think you need somebody to ride herd on you."

"Did you ever read *Timon of Athens*?"

"Come again."

"Shakespeare. The old Greek said, 'O you gods, think I, what need we have any friends, if we should ne'er have need of 'em? they were the most needless creatures living, should we ne'er have use for 'em, and would most resemble sweet instruments hung up in cases that keep their sounds to themselves.'"

"Pretty words, but they seem to make sense," Nellie said. "Never was much of a reader myself, though my gambler father tried to give me an education. All I've really found it necessary to read are the pasteboards."

"Yet you are an intelligent woman, and if your life satisfies you—"

"Who said it did? It's a living, but I get tired of having to pull a gun on every galoot who wants to paw me. Some day Jesse and me are going to get us a ranch and settle down and raise a flock of kids."

"More power to you, but I sort of gathered that a rope is dangling pretty close to your necks."

"They haven't caught us yet, and I think we can take care of ourselves."

"I have little doubt of it."

Paladin found her an interesting traveling companion. She was wild, untamed and free. The contrast between her and Inga Johansen couldn't have been greater. There was as much difference between them as between Inga and Ming, but she possessed qualities neither of

the others had. The other girls were dependent on someone, but Nellie Post was utterly self-reliant, and Paladin gave her his respect.

He had always had a soft spot in his heart for Jesse Warner; almost as if Jesse was his younger brother, and if Nellie was his woman he had chosen well. He had gotten over his suspicion of her, but was aware that she still had her reservations about him. Yet he was gradually winning her confidence and she told him frankly that she was helping Jesse steal back the horses Hatcher had stolen from him and others. It was, he gathered, a pretty well organized gang of real horse thieves led by a man named Nate Tucker who owned a place across the Utah line, with whom Jesse was doing business. It also included Turtle Jones, the owner of the Pioche livery stable. Nellie had given him information which would have taken him days to get from any other source.

He learned more about the connection between Hillary Hatcher and Captain Slater. In this country rich mines frequently had to be held by force, and a lot of them were held by men who had stolen them from the rightful owners. Nellie believed that the Panamacker mine had been stolen from the Mayberrys, and Slater could always call on Hatcher and his Missouri thugs in case he needed them. She did not believe that Ida Mayberry was still in the country.

They were passing through a rough, dry, and mountainous country, and they needed the good horses Nellie had chosen. Once he asked her how much out of the way it would be to pass by the Panamacker mine.

"Not more than ten or twelve miles if you want to go that way," she replied. "I can show you the mine, but I'm not going there."

"I doubt if I'll want to pay Captain Slater a visit at this time, but I'd like to look the place over," he said.

The wildness of the country made him glad that he had her along. About noon she left the trail and a couple of miles on came upon a water hole which only one who knew the country could have found. It was between two juniper-covered hills in a little cove, and as they approached a band of wild mustangs watering there saw them and fled wildly around the hill, their flint-hard hooves ringing on the rocks.

They dismounted beside the spring and watered their thirsty animals, then ate their lunch in the shade of a juniper.

"Have you ever been married, Paladin?" she asked companionably.

"No. Maybe I have missed something, but there has been rather too much violence in my life. I'm sure I'd be a bad husband, but I'm sure you and Jesse will be happy." She hadn't said much more about Jesse and he was trying to draw her out.

It was almost too much to hope that her young man was the same Jesse Warner he had known, though he might have come West. Her future attitude would depend on whether or not her Jesse Warner recognized him. If he didn't Nellie would think him an imposter, and he didn't want that to happen, aside from the danger.

"Whether you know it or not, Paladin, you are taking a long chance on Jesse. If he is the man you think he is, and I hope he is, you'll still be in trouble with the Hatcher crowd. If he isn't, and it turns out you are working for Hatcher, some of us will kill you."

"That doesn't give me much chance, Nellie, for I'd be banking on a coincidence."

"Then why don't you turn back?"

"There was a wise Greek named Plato who said, 'a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing so he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or bad.' "

"You have a lot of learning, but what good is it out here?"

Amused, he said, "A wise man said, 'Learning teacheth more in one year than experience in twenty . . . He hazardeth more than waxes wise by experience.' "

"Do you think your learning can find a way to the Panamacker easier than my experience?"

"I bow to your experience," he said.

"Then if we're going to get back here before night we'd better be going."

The country grew more rugged by the mile until they climbed through a saddle and looked down upon a flat desert broken by occasional high buttes. Nellie stopped and pointed. "There's the Panamacker."

Paladin could see a cluster of buildings a fourth of the way up the nearest butte, and there were considerable signs of activity. A long spur ridge ran nearly down to the butte from the ridge on which they stood, but there was a flat between.

Nellie pointed out a dusty road which she said led to Pioche, and a dimmer one leading through the hills in the direction of Paradox Valley. Paladin could see that it would be difficult getting down to either road.

"Well, if you've had your look we'd better be getting back to camp," she said. "We'd better leave the water hole at daybreak for unless we take a long detour we'll have to go within a mile or so of Hatcher's ranch, and they might not be hospitable."

"You're the doctor," he told her.

After they got back to the water hole Paladin staked the horses on the best grass he could find, and when he returned Nellie had a fire going and was making coffee and frying bacon and potatoes. It was deep dusk when they finished eating. Each had a light roll of blankets and without apology they made their beds some ten feet apart.

CHAPTER 18

The country through which Nellie conducted Paladin the next morning was rougher than anything he had yet seen. They rode through deep defiles and over high, rocky ridges, but she assured him that it was the closest way and admitted that she might not have taken it had she been riding alone. Her fear was simply that they might encounter some of Hatcher's men.

The sun was a couple of hours high when they looked down into a long, narrow, twisting valley far below them, which changed almost to a plain in the distance. They could see a few ranches along the small river which meandered its way down the valley.

"That's the Paradox," Nellie said. "Until this Hatcher outfit showed up people lived pretty quiet, peaceful lives. The Mayberry ranch where Hatcher now lives is about three miles below us but out of sight. Over to the left is Jesse Warner's ranch where I once expected to live. I think all the others have been run out, too."

Paladin had a sense of history being repeated. There was not much difference between Hatcher and Norge. In Delta Valley the people had a Smoke to defend them; here they had nobody. The only difference was that here he was going down into the valley instead of coming up.

Nellie said, "We can ride around back of Jesse's ranch, or we can go straight down within a mile or so of the Mayberry place. Either way we could bump into some of Hatcher's men."

"In that case let's take the nearest way," he said.

Nellie was understandably nervous, though far from timid. They finally reached the valley floor, and the road they had seen from above the Panamacker. They had ridden no more than a mile when Nellie's hope that they wouldn't be seen was dashed by two men riding out of a ravine in front of them. Both were men Paladin had seen in Tucson, but he doubted if they would remember him. They drew up with broad grins on their faces.

"Well, if it isn't the lady tin horn horse rustler from Pioche," one of them said. "You wasn't goin' to pass us by without makin' a friendly visit, was you? Old Hillary would be mighty hurt."

"We happen to be in a hurry," Nellie said. "Give him my regards."

"Not so fast, Nellie," the fellow said, and there was suddenly menace in their attitude. "I think you had better come back with us. Hillary wants to ask you some questions."

"Get out of our way, Monk," she warned coldly, but the men didn't

move.

“Who’s your friend, Nellie? Seems to me I’ve seen him before someplace. You ever see him before, Spence?”

“I think I have. Tryin’ to think where,” the other answered. “Looks like a soldier.”

“You heard the lady ask you to get out of the way,” Paladin said. “She won’t ask again.”

“By God, he must have been an officer the way he gives commands,” Monk said. “Now I’ll give one. Turn around and head for the ranch. Hatcher would like to hang Nellie alongside her horse-thief sweetheart, but maybe you’ll do.”

Their hands were on their guns and they had the mannerisms of professional gunfighters. Paladin thought that he could outdraw them, but the odds were heavy, and he didn’t want Nellie to get hurt. He started to turn his horse, then turned it back, and his ever-handly derringer was in his hand. He had Monk covered.

“This is a double-barreled derringer, and I can kill you both at this range. Do you want to make an issue of it?” he asked.

Monk, the endangered one, didn’t want to press matters, but Spence said recklessly, “He couldn’t hit a barn door with that thing,” and went for his gun.

Paladin’s shot went a little wide, but struck Spence in the upper part of his arm, and the fellow dropped his gun. Paladin swung the derringer back on Monk, and invited coldly, “Try it.”

“The hell with it,” Monk cried. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” They spurred back up the road.

“That was a mistake,” Nellie said. “You should have killed them both. In half an hour they’ll have the whole pack after us.”

“Then maybe we’d better ride.” It was two miles back to the ranch, so they could count on five miles start. “How far to Sulphurette?”

“Fifteen to twenty miles,” she said. “Make the pack horse keep up.” She had the lead rope and she spurred her roan to a fast run. Paladin fell in behind, stinging the pack horse along with the ends of his bridle reins.

Once she stopped to let the horses get their wind, and declared that she could see a posse in the distance, but Paladin could see nothing but a distant cloud of dust. “We’d better push on,” she urged.

“This must be like Joseph fleeing into Egypt,” he said. “Do you think Grandma Calloway can protect us?”

“Your sarcasm is wasted,” she flung back. “You may be glad for Babe Calloway’s help.”

“I’ll welcome it.”

“Another thing: Babe is pretty plain-spoken. She may talk about her former profession and you can use the right words, but don’t talk about soiled doves or she may slap you down. There’s nothing dovelike about Babe,” she warned. “She was a real pioneer woman.”

Nellie’s roan was able to maintain the pace but the two more heavily laden horses were showing the strain. “Go on and organize a countercharge, and I’ll fight a rear-guard action,” Paladin shouted. Nellie waved assent and kept going; but at a slower pace, and Paladin followed at a fast trot.

At last Paladin saw a group of small buildings in the bend of the river shaded by a clump of cottonwood trees, and he slowed down some more. Nellie, he reckoned, would reach the buildings of Sulphurette about a quarter of an hour ahead of him. He saw her roan feeding in the corral.

As he rode up, she appeared in the yard along with a lean, sun-tanned old woman whose gray locks blew untrammelled in the breeze. The old woman’s gray eyes searched Paladin in a way that missed nothing.

“Paladin, this is Babe,” Nellie said.

“I’m honored to know you, madam,” he said gallantly.

“I never achieved the dignity of a madam,” she said with an impish grin that once must have made the men fall in line. Then she added, “Once in a while one of your kind drifts out here, but not often.”

“What kind is that?”

“Too respectable to be outlaws, too proud to be bums, but too unsettled to be very good citizens.”

“Your perceptive qualities are astounding,” he smiled.

“Better feed your horse and oil up your guns if you’re expecting company,” the old lady said. “Nellie tells me you winged one of Hatcher’s buzzards.”

“I hope we’re not going to cause you any trouble.”

“Trouble? I’m used to it.” She shouted, “Pedro,” and a Mexican of about thirty with a black mustache appeared from the rear. “Tell Miguel to get up in the dugout, and you get down by the river shed.”

“Sí, señora.” The Mexican showed white teeth in a wide grin and hurried away.

“My two-man army,” Babe Calloway explained. “We can get anybody that comes in a three-way fire, and my boys are good shots.”

“You don’t really expect this Hatcher outfit to attack a United States post office, do you?” Paladin asked.

“If you had experience with Quantrill like Nellie says you have, you know that wouldn’t stop them.”

"I have, and I know it."

"Still, they've been chary about monkeying with me. I've got a good friend who is a United States senator, and if they ever raid this post office he'll have 'em run out of the state."

"That's comforting at least. So are your two Mexicans."

"I don't think they'll do more than bluff here, but Hatcher would give his eyeteeth to put a rope around Jesse Warner's neck, and Nellie's too. So they'll try to nab you when you leave."

"Here they come," Nellie called. There were eight people trotting up to the post office: Seven men and a woman, and Paladin got the first real shock of his trip when he saw the woman. She was Sybil Sanderson, and she had written the letter under Ida Mayberry's name to lure him down here where he could be killed. One of the men with her was Patsy Dugan.

Monk was along, and Paladin had no difficulty recognizing the evil visage of Hillary Hatcher.

At Babe's insistence Paladin and Nellie had withdrawn into the post office, while Babe herself strode to the door, her long skirts blowing about the heavy shoes on her feet.

"There's no mail for you, Hatcher," she said curtly.

"Didn't expect any," the man drawled. "You got tobaccer fer sale, and we want to buy some. Might even buy something else after we look over yer stock."

"Not in this store you won't," she said. "I don't want your trade."

"Guess you only sell to horse thieves. We saw a couple of 'em ride in here, and we want 'em."

"The only horse thieves here are you and your gang. If there was any decent law you'd all be swinging from a tree."

"You going to let that old battle-axe stop you, Hatcher?" Sybil Sanderson demanded scornfully, when Hatcher hesitated.

Paladin, watching over Babe's shoulder, saw one of the men surreptitiously take down his rope and shake out a small loop. As the fellow made a short, overhand cast Paladin jerked Babe back inside and the rope struck the floor. Paladin took the postmistress' place, revolver in hand.

"Leave it lay," he barked at the rope thrower. "Drop the other end." The roper dragged the loop back a few feet, then let the other end fall. He had expected backing, but it hadn't been forthcoming. Paladin had known that nothing so disconcerted a mob as unexpected aggressive action.

Paladin stepped outside as Babe Calloway nudged him and she took his place in the doorway with a double-barreled shotgun in her hands.

They could see Nellie Post at the window with another gun, and they knew Babe's two Mexicans were somewhere.

Paladin said, "If you want a party, Hatcher, you've got it. You should remember that I know what a pack of cowardly rats you were to begin with."

"Hold it, Hillary," Monk said, though his boss hadn't moved. "Them greasers are out here somewhere, and they'd just as soon shoot a man in the back as not."

There was no fight in them, and they probably had never intended one unless the odds were all in their favor. Hatcher started to turn away, but Paladin halted him.

"I've got a few words for you, Hatcher, and for your murderous woman companion and her paramour. This is not Missouri and Quantrill's methods won't work here. Decent people thought it an act of justice to shoot or hang your kind, and that hasn't changed. You can take your choice: get out of Paradox or die."

None of them moved. Paladin's voice was as hard and cold as steel, and his manner one of complete confidence. Individually, they were cowards, and the odds were not enough to make them feel brave.

"You talk big," Hatcher mouthed.

"In comparison to lice like you I'm as big as a house," Paladin retorted. "Now I've got a word for you, Mrs. Sanderson. Coming down here and writing me a forged letter was the biggest mistake you ever made. You can still be hanged up north for murder. Did you tell your friends here that you were the mistress of a crooked sheriff? What did you and Dugan do to him anyway—shoot him in the back?"

"How did you know about—" Dugan blurted before Sybil could tell him to shut up.

"If they shot a sheriff they're friends of mine," Hatcher said heavily. "Sooner or later I'm gonna hang that woman there and her horse-thief friend Warner. And that goes for you, Paladin, and maybe that old rip there. You know I never hung back on account of no woman."

"I know. You've done things no animal would be guilty of."

They had been edging their horses away, and suddenly they put the spurs to them and rode away at a gallop.

"I think we should have had it out with them right here," Babe said. "I'd have got a couple, and you should have been good for three, and Nellie and my boys would have got the others."

Paladin said, "I've been sided by some brave men, but none better or braver than you two ladies."

Nellie said: "You are a brave man or an awful fool, Paladin, to think that you could tackle this gang alone. It seems to me that me or that

woman is destined to be hanged, and right now I figure the odds are on her side.”

Paladin wasn't sure that she was wrong. He was in more than a handful of trouble, and he was trying to put the pieces together. Pioche had been a natural place for Sybil and Dugan to head for, and probably Dugan had known some of Hatcher's outfit. Sybil had written the letter. She was a bold, imaginative woman capable of baiting a trap to kill a man she feared or hated, but the scheme had been too devious for her to do all the planning. It wasn't Hatcher for he didn't have the brains. Neither had he the brains to take over this whole valley. He had come here as an employee of Captain Slater, and probably still was.

Babe Calloway agreed. “Slater is the real boss. It wasn't the Mayberry ranch he wanted so much as it was to get that mine that Aaron Mayberry discovered. It was easy for him to scare Ida Mayberry into selling, and once they got that place it was easy to take over the whole Valley. Jesse Warner was the only one who tried to fight back, so they branded him a criminal.”

Paladin said, “Slater and I had one little run-in, but it still seems funny to me that he would have helped Sybil write that letter accusing him of stealing that mine. But they both evidently wanted to get me out of the way, and if it hadn't been for Nellie they might have done it.”

“Nellie has no business running around out here,” Babe said. “Sooner or later they'll catch up with Jesse, and if she is with him they'll hang them both. You've got to get back to Pioche and stay there, Nellie.”

“Not until I see Jesse,” the girl said stubbornly. “That's what I came out here for. You got something on your mind, Paladin?”

“I have,” Paladin said. “I own stock in the Panamacker mine, and it will give me a legal reason to inquire into its affairs. If we can bring Mrs. Mayberry back here maybe we can prove that Slater stole the mine, and that would cut the ground from under the whole outfit.”

“It's a big order,” Babe said. “If you could guarantee Ida's safety I think I can get her back here. But right now you and Nellie are going to have one hell of a time getting back to Pioche yourselves.”

“The only way to kill a rattlesnake is to cut off its head, so we've got to get Slater. But first I'd like to see Jesse Warner,” Paladin said.

“So would I,” Nellie said, “and I'm going to do it. You can come along if you want to.”

“I don't know that I should tell you where he is,” Babe said doubtfully.

"I'll find him if I have to do it myself," Nellie said stubbornly.

"Well, you'll have to leave here in the night, for Hatcher will be watching this place in the daytime. You'd better wait here till I can send Miguel out to arrange a meeting place."

"If Miguel can find the way he can show us," Nellie insisted, and Paladin agreed.

It was finally settled that they would leave Sulphurette in time to reach the hills before daybreak, and then they would have a chance to see if they were being followed.

They left the pack horse behind the next morning, and with the younger Mexican to guide them were in the hills to the east before sunrise. Babe had provided them with a good field glass and Miguel went back as far as was safe to see if they were being followed. He returned with the report that he had seen a rider galloping away from Sulphurette, indicating that their departure had been discovered, but Miguel had seen no sign of pursuit.

Paladin didn't question Nellie's statement that sometimes the birds got lost flying over the country in which they found themselves, but that Jesse and his men knew it so well that Hatcher didn't have a ghost of a chance to find them. He didn't bother to ask if Babe Calloway and the Mexican boys had merely a sentimental interest in keeping in touch with Jesse, or if they were partners in his enterprise.

Miguel left them a little before sunset, but as it was turning dusk he returned with Jesse Warner. Jesse had been little more than a boy when Paladin had seen him last; now he was a bearded, broad-shouldered man, but Paladin knew him; a man from his past whom he had never expected to see until he had met Nellie Post.

The recognition was not mutual for Jesse gave him scarcely a glance. "Nellie! What the hell are you doing out here?" he demanded, but he swung off his horse and embraced and kissed her.

Presently Nellie stepped back and said, "Jesse, do you know this man?"

Jesse swung about on Paladin with a hard, suspicious look. He stared into Paladin's smiling face for a moment, then for the first time in many years Paladin heard his rightful name spoken. "Clay! Clay Alexander!" Jesse yelled. "The last man I ever expected to see. The last time I saw you I wouldn't have given a wooden nickel for your chances." He seized Paladin's hand, and then they hugged each other as only brothers would have done.

"Nellie," Jesse said, "this is the best friend I ever had. He was rich and I was poor as I am now, but that never made no difference to

Clay. Lord, what times we used to have.”

“Well, Paladin, I guess you wasn’t lying,” Nellie said.

“What’s this all about?” Jesse wanted to know. “What’s this paladin business?”

“That’s my name now, Jesse. You saved my life once, and I’m under obligation to your girl. Now I want to help you, but I really never figured on you turning out to be a horse thief.”

“I’m not. I’m only trying to get back my own.”

“I know. Nellie has told me all about it. I hope we can make that unnecessary.”

“You know, you were lucky to find us,” Jesse said. “We’ve got a bunch of Hatcher’s horses spotted, and tomorrow we’re goin’ to run ’em across the state line and turn ’em over to Tucker. I planned to slip into Pioche in a few days to see you, Nellie.”

“You keep out of Pioche,” she said. “Hatcher has got Chick Hayes and some other men laying for you.”

“Well, you folks must be hungry. It’s about a mile to camp. Come on.”

Paladin and Miguel rode a little way behind to let the lovers be by themselves. In an obscure canyon they came upon a campfire with four men sitting around it. They got to their feet warily, but Jesse said: “It’s all right. You all know Nellie, and this is an old friend of mine named Paladin. I’ll vouch for him.”

The men were about Jesse’s age, or younger; hard, wiry-looking fellows such as Paladin had expected to see. One of them got up to cook supper for the newcomers, another took over their horses. The other two merely sat around and listened, and one of them, Paladin thought casually, listened a little too hard for good manners.

As the three late arrivals were eating Jesse broke off in the middle of a story about Paladin’s escape from being shot as a spy to say: “You know that Captain Breck Helm that turned you in, Clay? Well, he’s a big-shot mining man now, only he calls himself Captain Slater.”

Paladin half strangled himself on the hot coffee he was drinking.

CHAPTER 19

Paladin was stunned as well as strangled. Once he had half convinced himself that Helm and Slater were identical, but he had given up the idea after he had been told that Breck Helm had been buried in St. Louis. It had not occurred to him that Helm might have buried another man under his name so that he might assume another identity.

When he got his breath back he asked, "What makes you so sure?"

"I told you I had never seen the man who tried to get you shot as a spy, but that I'd know his voice if I ever heard it again, and I've heard it several times since he come here. I know that Captain Slater is really Captain Breckenridge Helm," Jesse said.

"There is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we may"—Jesse, this is as big a favor as saving my life. I have spent years of time and hundreds of dollars trying to find that murderer, and you have delivered him into my hands."

Destiny had brought the worst of his enemies here to this particular spot, and they had lured him here to remove him from the earth, yet it was not as strange as it appeared at first sight. Only in a remote country such as southern Nevada could men like Quantrill's killers have found refuge. Mostly, it was a waterless waste which had been a nightmare for the emigrants who had tried to take their covered wagons across it. They had either turned back or died. It had been a graveyard for many of the prospectors who had ventured into it with their burros. Yet here and there was an oasis such as the Paradox which had been searched out by ranchers and stockmen with a dislike for too much society.

"I like my fellowman the best when he is scattered some," Paladin had often said, but these people were overdoing it. The honest men among them such as Jesse Warner and Aaron Mayberry were the natural prey of the vultures like Captain Slater and Hillary Hatcher.

The sensible thing was for him to go back to Pioche and start a legal battle with Captain Slater, but now he could think of the man only as Breck Helm, the ruthless destroyer of his parents. Both Helm and his associate, Hillary Hatcher, had been guilty of unspeakable crimes. The law was too slow; he had to deal with Breck Helm face to face, man to man.

He told the others his story, and they were more impressed by his determination than by any plan he could propose.

Jesse said: "Slater and Hatcher together must have more than fifty men. I don't see what you can do."

"I've got to get hold of this man who calls himself Slater."

"I wish we could help," Jesse said, "but we've got these horses, the best haul we ever made, and we can't let 'em go."

Nothing Paladin could say would change their minds, and Nellie was going to ride with them. "They'll never hang us," Jesse said confidently.

Paladin was just as sure that unless he could stop Breck Helm their enemies would eventually catch up with them, and Nellie's sex would not save her. Men like Hatcher would get an added pleasure from hanging a woman. Now he not only had to avenge an old crime, but he had to do it before Jesse and Nellie destroyed themselves. He had lived a long time with a smoldering lust for revenge, but now that people he liked faced an immediate peril it was much more important to prevent future wrongs than it was to avenge old ones. Facing himself soberly he knew that the vendetta against Helm had grown cold when he believed the man was dead. It had never been much more than an excuse for giving up orthodox living to follow a kind of life he preferred to any other. He was a paladin from choice; not because he had become dedicated to any certain mission. The danger he courted was like intoxication. He knew it was bad for him, but he had no intention of giving it up.

Paladin and Miguel said goodbye to the others in the morning and headed back for Sulphurette. Paladin wasn't sure that Babe Calloway was as immune to destruction as she thought she was. Hillary Hatcher was in control of the valley, and her senator friend was back in Washington. He knew his premonition was justified when they came in sight of Sulphurette—or what had once been such a place. Now all that remained was smoking ruins.

Miguel gave a little moan and spurred for the place at a gallop, and Paladin followed. Nothing remained of the post office and Babe's living quarters but smoking embers. It was typical Quantrill tactics, and Paladin had little hope that Babe and Pedro were still alive.

"I should have stayed," Miguel said. "Pedro was my elder brother, and Babe was like a mother to us. Now they are both dead."

"We don't know yet," Paladin said. They found poles and poked about in the ashes but found nothing "They may have hid some place," he said.

"No, they would not have run. They would have stayed and fought," Miguel said. "They are either dead or Hatcher's prisoners."

Paladin thought the last was more probable. The indications were that the house had been set on fire during the night, and Babe and

Pedro could have been caught when they ran out. If they were still alive the only place they could be was at the Mayberry ranch where Hillary Hatcher made his headquarters. And again it seemed probable to Paladin that a smarter man than Hatcher had planned this raid. Breck Helm had known that Paladin was looking for him, and he was the one Helm most wanted to destroy. If Helm had planned it he might be using Babe as some sort of hostage.

Miguel brought food that had been stored in the dugout and they prepared a meal. Shortly after midnight they rode toward the Hatcher ranch. Paladin figured that daybreak was the best time to nab Hatcher, or Helm if by any chance he should be there.

They concealed their horses and Miguel stayed with them while Paladin worked his way in toward the ranch house.

He was still a hundred yards from the house when unusual activity sent him diving for shelter behind an old piece of farm machinery. Something like twenty men were saddling their horses and getting ready to ride. Hatcher was shouting orders, but about all Paladin could make out was that they were going after Jesse Warner. He understood better when they galloped past him and he recognized one of the riders as a man who had been in Jesse Warner's camp.

It was plain as print. Hatcher had gotten to one of Jesse's men. Unless Jesse became suspicious over the fellow's absence the man would lead Hatcher to where Jesse would be with the stolen horses, and there would be a lynching party with Jesse and Nellie as certain victims.

As soon as the outlaws had gone Paladin waved to Miguel to join him and explained the situation.

"I can't warn them because I do not know where they are," Miguel said. "But Babe and my brother may be here."

"We'll just have to find out," Paladin said. "Watch the front of the house while I get in the back."

He reached the back door unnoticed and flung it open just as a man cook was lifting a pot of coffee from the stove. The gun in Paladin's hand was more persuasive than words. "Put it down and keep quiet," Paladin hissed. The man replaced the pot on the stove and stood back with his hands in the air. Paladin noticed a swinging door which he judged led into the dining room, and hurled himself through it. He had hoped to see Breck Helm, but the ones at the table were Sybil Sanderson and Patsy Dugan. They were caught completely by surprise and Sybil's coffee cup clattered to the floor.

"Where's Mrs. Calloway?" Paladin demanded without wasting words.

"Try and find her," she snarled.

"I will. Sit still. I won't kill you, but you won't look so good without ears," Paladin said grimly. "There's a butcher knife, Patsy—take it up and cut off her ears or swallow a bullet yourself."

Dugan hesitated, then shrinking from the death he saw in Paladin's implacable gaze fumbled for the butcher knife.

"You yellow bastard," Sybil cried. "The old woman and the Mexican are in a cellar under the floor."

Paladin called Miguel in, and quickly tied up Sybil, Patsy and the cook in a bedroom. Then they found the trap door and Miguel went down. Both Babe and Pedro had been bound and gagged, but Pedro had the added torture of being suspended by his thumbs until only his toes dragged the dirt floor.

Miguel swiftly released them both and they climbed the ladder to the kitchen with Babe swearing steadily, but thickly.

"I know how you feel," Paladin said sympathetically. "But what happened?"

"They set fire to the house while we were asleep, and roped us both before we had a chance to do anything. Look, the only thing I'm wearing is my nightdress."

"But why the torture?"

"Captain Slater was with 'em then, and he told that woman to torture Pedro until I signed a paper that you had robbed the post office and then burned it down. I'd have done it if it had kept up."

"No, señora, I could have stood it," Pedro said.

Babe went on, "Something happened. I heard old Hatcher tell somebody he'd soon have you and Jesse and Nellie back here and would hang all three of you. I think it was Slater he was talking to. But where the devil did you come from, and where are Nellie and Jess?"

Paladin told her what had happened and saw the gloom settle over her face. She said: "Then there's nothing we can do. Miguel, who was the traitor to Jesse?"

"I do not see him."

"I think they called him Croyden at the camp. I noticed that he was awfully interested in the talk," Paladin said.

"Herb Croyden. I never did think much of him. You sure you don't know where Jesse had the horses hidden?" she asked Miguel.

"They were careful not to say. It is a big country. I will search if you say so," Miguel said.

"I think there may be a better way," Paladin said. "We must take advantage of their sadistic natures. If they catch our friends they'll bring them back here to give your Captain Slater and these others in

here a show. Hatcher wouldn't want to miss that."

"And if they do, what then? They'll be at least twenty against four," Babe said.

Paladin had opened the door of the bedroom, so the prisoners there could hear what was being said. Now he said, "I'm going to try to bring Slater back here before Hatcher gets back. It's our only chance. You and your boys stand guard over the prisoners, but have horses ready to take to the hills if Hatcher gets back before I do."

"What about them?" Babe indicated the prisoners in the other room.

"I'll leave that up to you. You could set fire to the place, but you ought to let the man cook go. If you want to roast the others I'll have no objection."

"Nothing could give me more pleasure," Babe grinned. "That woman is the most bloodthirsty of the crew. You should have heard her threaten what she was going to do to Pedro. If I'd signed what they wanted they would have killed us anyway. People like them belong in hell, so I won't mind givin' 'em a little foretaste."

"Paladin," Sybil screamed, "you can't go away and leave us. That old hag would do just what she says."

"Sorry, Sybil, I didn't invite you down here. It was the other way around, remember. You and Patsy have forfeited your right to live a dozen times. Babe isn't going to let you live to gloat when they hang Nellie Post."

"Paladin, listen," Sybil cried. "We brought fifty thousand dollars with us from Owyhee. It's in the bank at Hamilton, and I can show you a receipt for it. Let me and Patsy go and I'll write you a check for it."

"I'll make just one kind of a deal with you, Sybil," Paladin said thoughtfully. "You write a letter for me to Slater, and I'll promise that we won't hurt you, though what the law may do is another matter."

"All right. What do you want me to write?"

Paladin found pen and paper, and allowed her time to flex her fingers after releasing her. "Don't try to disguise your handwriting, because I've got a good sample of it in the letter you wrote me. Now write: 'Captain Slater. The old woman is dying. For God's sake come at once. Sybil.'"

"I wish to God she was," Sybil said bitterly after she had written the note.

"Tie her up again," Paladin directed the two Mexicans.

"You've got the note but how are you going to get it to Slater?" Babe demanded.

"The cook," he said. "He's less vicious than the others. When I get

through talking to him I have an idea he'll just deliver the note, say nothing, and keep right on going."

The man was more than willing to make the ride after being released. He admitted that he was an outlaw, but was considered too soft by Hatcher and so held the ignominious job of cook. Paladin believed him when he said he wanted nothing so much as to break away from Hatcher.

Paladin gave the man the note and saddled a horse for him. "You ride hard as though it was a matter of life and death, which it is," he told the man. "Just give the note to Slater and tell him Sybil wants him to hurry back here. Nothing else. Don't mention me being here, you understand?"

"I understand, and Mister, I'm scared enough not to make any mistakes," the cook said.

The only reason Paladin did not go after Slater himself was that getting Slater back could be the only way to save the lives of Jesse Warner and those with him, and he was not sure he could bring Breck Helm back alive if he went after him. He must smother his hatred a little longer.

"I still don't see what you can do if Slater does come," Babe Calloway said. "If I know Jesse and Nellie, and I think I do, they'll both kill themselves before they'll surrender to Hatcher."

"I'm counting on Hatcher thinking that too so he'll try to surprise them before they have the chance. I think we can make Slater persuade Hatcher to let them go."

"You're pretty persuasive, I'll admit, but I don't think it'll work," she said. Somewhere she had found an old dress, but it aggravated her because it was too short and too loose.

"It may not, so the best thing for you and your boys to do is ride to Pioche for help. There's no use for you to take any more chances."

"Mr. Paladin, do I look like I was built for running?" she shot back. "I'm going to see the finish of this thing, and Lord let it be soon."

"I figured you'd say that," Paladin smiled. "Since we've got some time let's get as ready for Hatcher as we can."

Paladin had found a keg of black powder, and they buried most of the powder and half a keg of horseshoe nails in the yard about where Hatcher and his men could be expected to stop when they returned. They then ran a line of black powder from the improvised mine to the house, where a match applied to it would cause an explosion within seconds.

"It won't kill anybody," Paladin said, "but it may cause a little confusion."

"I'd like you to let me take over that part of the job," Babe requested. "It would be better for us all to die than fall into the hands of those monsters again."

"Take comfort from Plato who said, 'No one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good.' "

"That's good philosophy, Paladin. I've read Plato myself."

"Babe, if we ever get out of this I may ask you to marry me," Paladin smiled.

She replied, "Former sporting girls, they say, make the best wives, but Mr. Calloway, God rest his soul, would not agree with that."

The afternoon was well along when Pedro galloped in from his post on the road to the Panamacker, and held up one finger. "Captain Slater, he come," he announced.

Bitter memories rushed through Paladin's mind. For the second time he was going to see the man who had played havoc with his life, and this time he would know him. He was glad that he had a few minutes' warning for when he thought of his parents he felt the old impulse to kill their murderer on sight. Too much was at stake to yield to an impulse. Helm must pay, but first he must serve a purpose. He thrust the memories from his mind, and concentrated on the present.

"Good work, Pedro," he said. "Keep out of sight, and after Slater gets here you ride back to see if anybody is following him. We don't want to be caught off guard."

He told Babe and Miguel also to remain in the house, and then when he saw Slater riding unconcernedly in he walked out in the yard to face his enemy.

Breck Helm was less than fifty feet distant when he saw Paladin, but it took only a second for him to erase the astonishment from his face. He tightened the reins and brought his horse from a lope to a walk, but didn't quite stop. Neither did he make a move toward his gun. Paladin waited until the man stopped ten feet from him to speak.

"I've long wanted to meet you, Captain Helm," he said.

"So you know me. I've wanted to meet you, too, but under circumstances more to my advantage than they appear to be here."

"You are right about that, Captain. I could kill you before you could touch your gun. You are also covered from the window. I intend to kill you, but when the time comes it will not be murder. I'll give you a better chance than you gave my father."

"That was war, Paladin. You served your cause, and I served mine."

"Murdering my parents wasn't to help your cause."

"Your father was a link. He knew where you were, and it was my

duty to make him tell where you were.”

“No, Helm. I know what you did to my father. I talked with men who saw his tortured body. And I saw other men who got the same treatment after you joined Quantrill. You killed my mother, and you took everything in the house of value. You were still trying to sell securities after the war was over. A Negro servant woman told me how you gloated when you told my mother what you had done to my father, and what you intended to do to me,” Paladin stated flatly.

“So now, somehow, you have tricked me into coming here. I am not sorry for anything I did,” Helm said. “You Yankees ruined the South. I got enough from your people and others to start over and I think, Paladin, I’ll still come out on top. It’s too bad we didn’t recognize each other the one time we met, or we wouldn’t have had to go through this.”

“We’ve talked enough,” Paladin said. “You turned me into a professional killer, and I’ve learned my trade well. If I have to shoot you it’ll be where you’ll be a long time dying. I want your gun.”

Helm weighed his chances, and knew that the grim man in front of him was not bluffing. He could drop his gun and live, at least for a little while, and the country was full of his men and Paladin was alone. He dismounted slowly and carefully handed Paladin his gun.

“Now will you satisfy my curiosity as to how you happen to be here, and how you persuaded someone to write me a deceitful note. I hadn’t thought you capable of such trickery,” he said.

“One learns to fight fire with fire, Helm, and since torture and extortion are favorite methods of yours I am using them against you. You came here, I believe, to inquire about Mrs. Calloway’s health. As you can see it is very good.”

Babe had come out, and Helm betrayed more surprise at seeing her than he had Paladin. “I should have had you hanged last night, old woman,” he said.

“I’ve seen men you hanged, you dirty strangler, and if I had my way we’d see you dancing a jig at the end of a derrick pole in the next five minutes,” Babe cried angrily.

“Fortunately our friend Paladin is more civilized,” Helm shrugged.

“Tie his hands, Miguel, and put him in with the others,” Paladin directed. “Your life will depend on how much control you have over your man Hatcher, Helm. It’s the only chance you will ever have.”

“And what chance is that?” Helm demanded.

“I’ll give you your gun back, and we’ll settle our differences by the code,” Paladin told him.

CHAPTER 20

It could be anywhere from one to four days before they could expect Hatcher's return. In the meantime somebody might come from the Panamacker looking for Slater, and Paladin and the two Mexicans took turns standing guard. The climax that was building up was far different from what Paladin had anticipated during his long search for Helm, but when it was over he or Helm would be dead, yet now his concern had to be for the others who had become involved with him.

In the meantime the prisoners had to be guarded and fed, and they freed them one at a time, and only long enough for them to eat. Paladin was not surprised when a bitter quarrel broke out between Helm and Sybil Sanderson. She accused him of being a fool and a coward, and he charged that there would have been no trouble had she never come to Pioche. Patsy Dugan cursed them both impartially.

"I'm not used to such language, and if you don't shut up I'll have Miguel gag all three of you," Babe told them.

"If I ever get my hands on you, you old blister—" Sybil hissed.

About four o'clock the third day Miguel announced that a single rider was coming in from the range.

"A messenger, no doubt," Paladin said. "Everybody keep out of sight."

The man rode into the yard without hesitation, but he seemed paralyzed when Paladin stepped out of the house, and Pedro appeared behind him.

"Just drop your gun and come into the house," Paladin ordered. "Captain Slater is waiting to see you."

"He's the one I want to see," the fellow stammered.

"And just what tidings did you bring? We, too, are curious." Paladin emphasized the request by pointing his gun at the man's body.

"We caught the horse thieves before they had a chance to either run or fight, and Hatcher is bringin' 'em in," the man said reluctantly.

"Where are they now?"

"I left 'em about five miles back."

"Then they should be here inside an hour." They trussed the man up and threw him in with the others.

Before the hour was up Hatcher's men were in sight, and soon they could see Nellie and Jesse and Jesse's men in the center of the party. Their hands were tied, and their stirrups lashed together underneath

their horses' bellies.

The faces of the prisoners were grim and tired, while Hatcher wore a look of sadistic satisfaction. They rode up and stopped about where Paladin had figured they would.

Paladin had tied Helm's hands behind his back, and now he said, "The moment of truth has arrived, Captain Helm. Step to the door and do exactly as I have instructed you. You can die a long and lingering death from a bullet in the back."

He was out of sight behind Helm, Babe stood ready with matches in her hand and a shotgun beside her, while Pedro and Miguel were concealed behind the outlaws.

"We got 'em, Captain Slater," Hatcher cried triumphantly. "We can hang all five of 'em before sundown."

Captain Helm said, "You lead their horses up here where I can talk to them. The rest of you stay where you are."

Though puzzled by the order Hatcher gathered the lead ropes of the prisoners' horses and led them closer to the door. "Anything the matter, Captain?" he asked. "You look sick."

"Look out, Hatcher!" Slater yelled, and dived almost under Hatcher's horse.

Paladin wasted no bullet on Breck Helm. The one that could have shattered Helm's spine caught Hatcher in the stomach. Paladin heard the plunk of it as he made a rolling dive to the left, hoping to draw the outlaws' fire away from the helpless prisoners.

He would have been as helpless as a crippled calf had Babe Calloway been less alert, as the outlaws spurred to close in on him but a streak of serpentine fire leaped across the yard and the earth erupted under the outlaws' horses. The explosion was frightening, but some of the animals were stung by flying horseshoe nails. The reaction of any desert bronco to such treatment was to buck and they went at it. It was a wild melee of bucking horses, gunfire, and riders flying through the air.

Pedro and Miguel went into action from the rear, and the outlaws were demoralized. Several bullets came close to Paladin as he got to his feet, but none of the outlaws had time to aim, though Paladin saw Monk pull down on the excited Miguel. A bullet from his gun knocked Monk out of the saddle. Those riders still in the saddle spurred for the open country and half a dozen of them made it.

The loose horses were following the fleeing riders, and those on which the helpless prisoners were tied had the same idea. Paladin made a long lunge and caught the hackamore rope of Nellie's horse, throwing it back on its haunches. Babe Calloway tried to catch

another, but was knocked down by a horse's rump. Jesse and his men were carried out in the desert where the outlaws had only to turn and shoot them once they recovered their senses.

Miguel and Pedro saved them. The Mexicans caught two loose horses and skillfully cut back the runaways as though they were working a roundup.

Paladin cut Nellie's feet loose and lifted her from the saddle, then ran to Babe Calloway's assistance. She let him help her up, and though her face was twisted in pain, she said, "Best darned rodeo I've seen in a coon's age."

"You'll do, Babe," he said. "You'll do in any man's country." Then he turned his attention to the outlaws on the ground, but there was no fight left in them. Three of them had been wounded, and a few of the others had caught horseshoe nails in their legs or been trampled when they were bucked off. They lined up obediently.

Suddenly Paladin missed Breck Helm. Babe and her boys had things under control now and he ran around the house in time to see Helm running up a low, rocky ridge. With his hands tied behind him the man was having hard going, but he was trying desperately to make it over the ridge.

Paladin was about to turn back to get a horse when he heard the man scream. Helm had stumbled and fallen, and now he was rolling over and over back down the steep slope. Paladin saw the reason for the scream when he reached the man. Helm had fallen upon a three-foot-long rattlesnake, and its fangs had sunk into his throat and caught in the collar of his shirt. As he rolled, Helm had coiled the reptile around his own neck.

Breck Helm would hold for a while, and it was just retribution that he should know a few minutes of frenzied terror. Paladin ran back to assist the others.

Jesse and his men were loose and were helping to tie up the outlaws. Babe and Nellie had gone into the house, though Babe came out soon and asked, "Where's Slater?"

"Come and look," Paladin told her.

Helm had rolled to the foot of the ridge, and lay quiet now, though his eyes protruded horribly from fear and agony. "Help me," he moaned.

Paladin caught the snake by the tail and managed to unroll it from Helm's neck by rolling the man over. He could have killed the rattlesnake, but instead he threw it as far as he could, and it crawled away.

Babe bent over the prostrate man, and said: "It bit him right in the

jugular vein. There's nothing can be done for him."

She was right, but they carried the man into the house and the sight of him threw Sybil into hysterics, while Dugan cursed her as the author of all his troubles, until Paladin ordered him to keep quiet.

One of the prisoners was Herb Croyden, the man who had betrayed Jesse, and he had a horseshoe nail in his knee. "Maybe he'll get blood poison," Jesse said hopefully. He turned to Paladin. "If you ever thought you owed me anything, Clay, the debt is paid now. What're we goin' to do with the rest of them?"

"In the morning we'll start back to Pioche with them."

"Not me and my boys," Jesse said. "We're going back and pick up those horses."

Paladin said, "There were times when you were a kid when nothing but a kick in the rump would put any sense into your head. This looks like one of those times."

"You can kick me, but it won't change my mind."

"Look: there's no evidence against you. Some of these fellows have already offered to swear that Slater and Hatcher stole these ranches, and that Slater had Mayberry killed to get the Panamacker mine. You'll get your ranches and your horses back if you give up this horse rustling business. What's more, I believe Nellie would rather be a rancher's wife than a blackjack dealer."

"After coming as close to hanging as we did there's no doubt about it," Nellie said emphatically.

"Well, I guess I lose," Jesse grinned.

"You never won a bigger pot, either one of you," Babe said.

Sybil Sanderson screamed: "Get this dead man out of here. What about us? We had nothing to do with this."

"You had plenty," Paladin told her, "but I'll only take you back to Pioche and wire Jim Oakley at Owyhee. You can't touch that money in the Hamilton bank, and when they get it back they may not hang you for murdering Sheriff Upjohn, but they will hang Dugan, I hope, for the murder of that Chinaman."

"He was the one killed Upjohn," Sybil charged.

"But you told me to," Dugan said. "If I hang you'll hang with me."

They were an odious pair, but they no longer had the power to harm, and they had suffered considerable physical punishment. Paladin released them with a warning not to try to leave, and made sure that the horses were all guarded. If they slipped away it would have to be on foot. He didn't think they would try that, but the next morning they were gone.

Miguel, who had been assigned to watch them, confessed that he

had gone to sleep, and they had escaped through a window. Finding the horses too well guarded they had apparently struck out on foot for the Panamacker.

Paladin was quite sure they would overtake the fugitives and didn't worry about them, though there could still be trouble with the crew at the Panamacker. Before starting out he got written statements from half a dozen of the outlaws who were willing to turn state's evidence.

It was a hot day, and they traveled slowly. Just after noon Paladin noticed a pair of buzzards fly up from behind a sand dune. With a premonition of what he might find Paladin rode over to see what had disturbed them. He stopped and addressed the lifeless body of Patsy Dugan: " 'Cast not your eyes on the beauty of woman, lest ye cast away your life with folly.' "

Dugan had been stabbed a dozen times, and there were signs of a desperate struggle. A bloody butcher knife lay in the sand. It was not hard to diagnose what had happened. Sybil had managed to steal a butcher knife from the kitchen. The couple had quarreled, and thirst and weariness had made it worse. They had stopped to rest in such shade as they could find, and Sybil had stabbed Dugan in the chest, and kept on stabbing until he was dead.

"It's nothing you want to see," Paladin told the others. "We'll send somebody back to bury Dugan."

"What about the woman?" Babe inquired.

"She may make it to the mine, maybe not."

Eventually they rode up to the buildings surrounding the portal of the mine and five or six men came out of one house to see who they were. Only one man looked hostile, but there was more fear in him than anything else—but Norge was no more surprised to see Paladin than Paladin was at seeing him.

"I hoped you were dead," Norge said bitterly.

"And I hope you invested all your money in Slater's mining company," Paladin retorted. "I assume that you did since you furnished Slater some of his gunmen. He would pay you by selling you his worthless mining stock." The sickly look on Norge's face told him that he had guessed right.

"Wherever I meet you I lose money," Norge complained with helpless, frustrated anger.

A man in a corduroy suit demanded, "What's this all about?"

"You are Andrews, the mine superintendent?"

"That's right, and who are you?"

"A stockholder in this company," Paladin replied. "The man you knew as Captain Slater is dead. His real name was Breck Helm. He

was an army deserter, and a crook and an all-around scoundrel. He murdered the owner of this mine, and for the present I'm taking it over. You can cooperate with me, or you can get out."

"I'm a mining engineer, not a gunfighter. If you can prove what you say I'll cooperate."

Paladin showed his credentials: his card, and his stock certificate. He told Andrews and the listening men what had happened, and got corroboration from his prisoners, some of whom were known to Andrews.

"I never liked the setup here," Andrews said, "but Slater paid good money. You're in charge. Nobody here will make trouble."

Paladin said, "We'll stay here tonight and go on to Pioche in the morning. Legal steps will be taken to restore the mine to Mrs. Mayberry, but in the meantime I would appreciate it if you would take over here, and I'll see that you get paid for your work."

"That's fine with me," Andrews said. "A woman staggered in here a while ago, exhausted, and clear out of her head. Do you know anything about her?"

"Yes, she stabbed her male companion, and I'd like you to send some men back to bury him."

Sybil was utterly irrational in the morning, and it was Paladin's opinion, concurred in by Babe Calloway, that her mind had cracked and that she would never be sane again—if indeed she had ever been.

"It's just as well," Paladin said. "She would either hang or have to spend the rest of her life in prison."

"I feel sorry for her," Nellie said.

"Me, too; in the same way I could feel sorry for Lady Macbeth," Paladin said.

Several ore wagons were going to Pioche in the morning and Paladin commandeered two of them for Sybil and the other prisoners.

"I'd like a ride too," Norge said. "I want to get back to San Francisco."

Paladin said grimly, "Norge, I'll give you a ride as far as Pioche, but I'm going to San Francisco, and I like the city too well to ever let you go back there. If I ever see you there again, Norge, so help me I'll earn the money Smoke paid me to kill you."

At command Norge climbed into the wagon with the insane Sybil Sanderson.

They reached Pioche that evening, and turned the prisoners over to the sheriff. Paladin cleaned up and took Babe Calloway, Nellie Post, and Jesse Warner to supper at the Meadow Valley Hotel, and ordered

a meal that got warm appreciation from Babe and the erstwhile horse thieves.

Paladin went to bed with the feeling that his work was finished. He could safely leave the details here in the capable hands of Babe Calloway. Jesse and Nellie were at last pointed in the right direction. Breck Helm was dead, and the long quest for vengeance that had changed the whole course of his life was at an end. What he would do now was a question to which he had no answer.

The next morning he said goodbye to his friends and took the stage to Hamilton. Three days later he was back in San Francisco.

Hey Boy was on hand to greet him effusively. "Good to have you home, Mr. Paladin," he said. "You big hero in Chinatown. Everybody glad the Bow Hong Dow leave San Francisco."

"I'm glad to hear it. Take my bags up to my room."

"Yes, Mr. Paladin. Barbership still open."

"What's back of that solicitude about my looks?"

"I just think you might like to look your best when you take Miss Johansen to dinner," Hey Boy said.

"Is Inga here?" he asked in astonishment.

"Oh, yes, and she most anxious to see you."

"Well, take this up to her," Paladin said. He took out a card and scribbled on it, "Have dinner with me tonight?" and handed it over to Hey Boy.

He was carefully barbered and dressed in his best when he went down to the lobby to wait. He had smoked half of a long cigar when she came in, looking radiantly beautiful in a green gown; her neck and wrists and hands sparkling with diamonds. She came toward him with both hands extended, and gave him her lips. She had never seemed more desirable.

"It's good to see you again, Paladin," she said. "Did you get your man from Texas fixed up?"

"No," he answered slowly, "I had another call to make. But I found a letter from him waiting for me, and he has jumped the price for my services. I'll be leaving for Texas tomorrow."

"Once a paladin, always a paladin, I guess," she sighed.

"I am building up quite a trade," he smiled. "But where is Ming?"

"This is going to shock you, Paladin, but you've lost a concubine you never had—I hope. Ming fell in love with an American and is going to marry him."

"Is he a good man?" he asked.

"You ought to know. You recommended Rod Jefferson to my father,

and Eric thinks he'll go a long way in the lumber business."

"Wonderful. I haven't heard better news in a long while."

"Of course Ming didn't want to marry Rod without your consent, but I told her to go ahead, that I would answer for you. That was all right, wasn't it?" Inga asked.

"It was all right."

"Ming thinks we are going to be married," she said softly.

Paladin reached over and patted her hand. "It would be a most pleasant prospect, Inga, for you are the one woman I am not sure I can live without. However, as Molière, I think it was, said, 'I know that we have no command over our inclinations, that love will everywhere spring up spontaneously, that there is no entering the heart by force, and that every soul is free to name its conqueror.' "

Inga's smile faded, then made a valiant effort to brighten. She said, "Molière was a misanthrope, but he was right. One cannot enter a heart by force, or soften one that is surrounded by granite. Let's enjoy our dinner—I have a feeling that it is going to be our last one."

They went into the dining room arm and arm, and Paladin offered a toast: "To the loveliest lady I have ever known."

THE END